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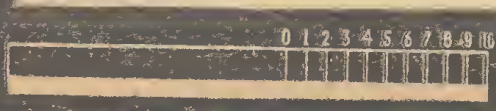

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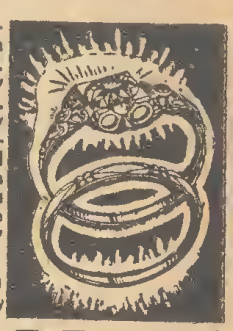

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Volume Two, Number Six **August, 1942**

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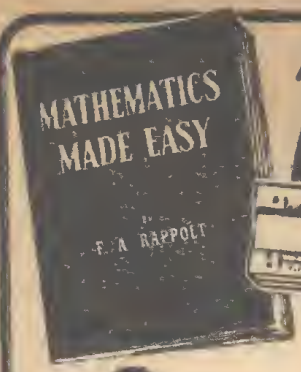

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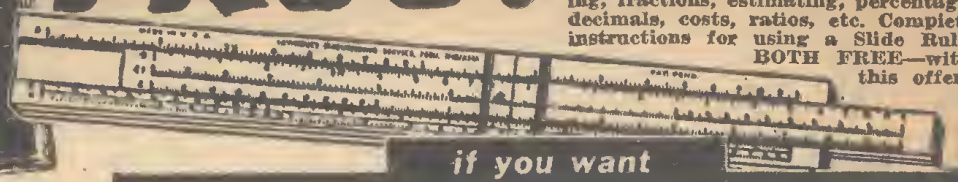

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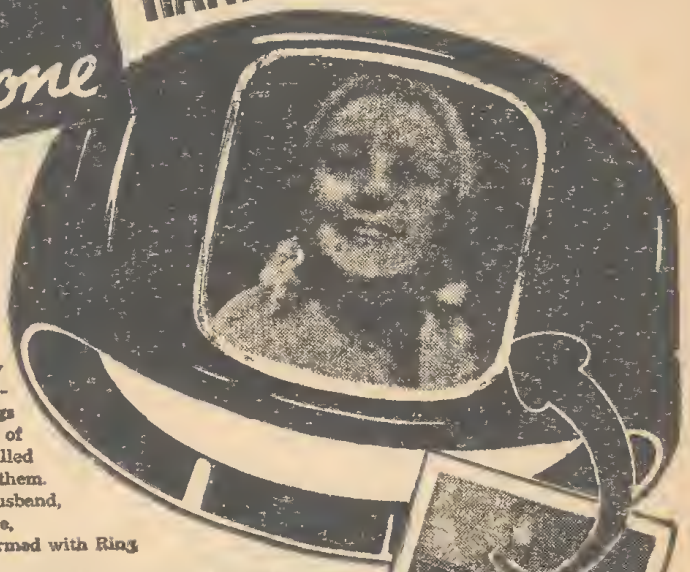

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(Illustrated by John R. Forte, Jr.)

ONCE IN A BLUE MOON

by NORMAN L. KNIGHT

What grim irony: The Martian author had written of an imaginary utopia which he placed upon a world in the system of Alpha Draconis. Now, decades later, while accompanying a Terrestrial expedition to this most un-utopian world, he found that a party of Earthmen had taken his fiction for fact and landed here!

(Author of "Fugitive From Vanguard," "Crisis in Utopia," etc.)

now became aware of the clanking, hissing newcomer and charged upon legs.

THE OPENING phase of exploration beyond the circuit of the Solar planets was pervaded by a spirit of headlong pursuit of horizons that had receded to infinity, by a sense of unprecedented release, of inexhaustible novelty, of the bursting of world-old barriers. Mars, unexpectedly more kindred than had been surmised, and Earth alike flung their ships among the stars at ever-mounting velocities in a reckless fury of discovery, and uncounted voyagers on those ships perished in an endless variety of ways—fantastic, dismal, or shocking.

Speedily it was realized that the stellar universe was not merely a bottomless Pandora's box of opportunity and wonder, but that it was also a realm brutally indifferent to the welfare of alien explorers. And the explorers were not alone in their misfortunes. The parent worlds and their far-flung colonies were ravaged by strange epidemics which slipped past unsuspecting quarantines and for which remedial measures usually were forthcoming only after prolonged and hectic research. Indiscreet importations of plant and animal life at times thrived exuberantly until they became either a pest or a menace. Insidious cumulative effects of foreign atmospheres, water supplies, or foods annihilated whole colonies. Contact with the Solar cultures decimated luckless indigenous races on foreign worlds or heavily curtailed some essential resources.

The next phase was one of more sober

judgment, maturer caution, and systematic control over the process of expansion. The traditions of the first untrammeled rovers were perpetuated in some measure by the Primary Reconnaissance cruisers, whose courses ranged outward into the galaxy in an ever-widening sphere. These vessels accurately charted the locations and characteristics of stars, the orbits and number of attendant planets, the obstacles and aids to navigation. Above all, they noted the locations of "suitable worlds"—that is to say, worlds which might be suitable for colonization by the Solar races. Such craft were strictly forbidden to land upon any uncertified world, or to penetrate its atmosphere, or even to collect samples of the atmosphere with remote-controlled sounding-shells. They were in fact prohibited from approaching within less than two thousand miles of any planetary body with an atmosphere. Such stringent precautions were designed to prevent the inter-world transport of undesirable spores or other minute floating organisms whose existence alive in the soft-vacuum zone surrounding other worlds has been abundantly—sometimes tragically—demonstrated.

FOLLOWING the report of a "suitable world" by the Primary cruiser, a vessel dispatched by the Inter-World Sanitary Service would survey it minutely from the standpoint of public health and hygiene. The Sanitary Service craft were known as "Caduceus ships" since they displayed the ancient emblem of the serpent-entwined staff of Hermes. They were huge globular affairs approaching a small asteroid in size, and carried within themselves smaller subsidiary vessels with which the actual landings were effected. It was a primary principle of the Sanitary Service that no Caduceus ship should bring to nor carry away from any world, before it had been certified, any micro-organisms save those in its bacteriological laboratory—which was separated from the remainder of the interior by impregnable bulkheads and approached through quadruple air-locks. Therefore the Caduceus ship itself made no landing, but remained in the vicinity of the world under observation, sending down supplies or receiving samples and cultures in remote-controlled craft which were scrupulously sterilized on their return to the mother ship.

The narrative which presently we shall proceed to relate concerns certain findings reported by the ship Caduceus of Alcor, out of Alcorhaven, a colonized world revolving about the star Alcor in Ursa Major. The planet which is the subject of this report has come to be known as Kenia, after a region on the terrestrial continent of Africa, for reasons which will appear in due course. It accompanies the star Azuran in the neighborhood of Alpha Draconis—visible from Alcorhaven but not from Earth because of intervening clouds of opaque matter.

The report above mentioned was compiled by Counselor Jeffery Sarrasen, the adviser and director of the landing-party; and while it gives a lucid, scholarly, and technical account of the biological and hygienic aspects of life on Kenia—including the peculiar civilization of the Wall-Makers—it omits equally interesting personal matters. The latter are recorded in Counselor Sarrasen's private log and in the writings of that Herodotus of the spaceways, the Earth-born Martian Ilrai the Younger—both of whom give an eye-witness account.

Ilrai's presence on a ship of the Sanitary Service seems curious when one learns that he had no official connection therewith. But there is evidence that he was an adept at wire-pulling and the application of diplomatic persuasion in influential quarters. He appears to have spent half of his life turning up in strange places. He was disturbed by the fact that the diffusion of the Solar races had outstripped their means of rapid communication, and feared that they were in danger of losing their sense of unity. Therefore he conceived of writing—and publishing on an inter-world scale—a sort of conglomerate prose epic concerning unusual and widely-dispersed events, which should be the basis of a universal literature. The Galactic Chronicles were the result, and had grown to thirty-one volumes at his death midway of the twenty-seventh century.

At that time our migration through the galaxy was a slow and creeping progress—or so it seems today. The fastest cruiser then in existence, if it could have reached maximum speed instantly and maintained it uninterruptedly for the span of an average human lifetime, could have travelled only halfway along the longest galactic diameter. Even so, the ships travelled faster than the fastest means of signalling them known. The discovery of the vibratory gravitational

beam, which led to the stereophone, was an event still in the future.

But our story lies in the past, in the year 2615 A. D., and it begins in the cabin of Captain Jutland, the skipper of the Caduceus of Alcor.

CHAPTER I

"SO FAR as we can tell from here, Sarrasen, this AL237 seems to be a fairly decent sort of a world, as planets go," declared Captain Jutland. "The daylight side has been completely blanketed by clouds and thunderstorms ever since we arrived. It will be queer, living under a blue sun, but probably you'll never see it—only a sort of blue twilight filtering through the clouds. It's always clear and apparently calm on the dark side, and I'd advise landing there. No need to feel your way through a two- or three-mile depth of storm-clouds if you don't have to. The odds are that you won't run into any especially perplexing problems unless the thing's inhabited—and we've had no chance to see any markings of structures during the day on account of the clouds. You're fortunate in taking down your first landing-party on what may be a comparatively simple mission. But I don't need to tell you these things. You've followed the findings up to date."

"I have, and they seem too favorable to be true," responded Counselor Sarrasen. "Gravity about one-fifth more than Alcorhaven's. Atmosphere breathable, with about twice our accustomed amount of oxygen, the rest mainly nitrogen. The samples of air and water that were brought up by the soundings gave mostly negative results. The cultures grown from them were practically innocuous. Some white rats broke out with green freckles on their bellies but didn't seem to care. Three Martian eikrangs showed signs of lassitude, ran a slight temperature, recovered in forty-five hours, Himberling isolated the toxin and synthesized the antibody in both cases."

Captain Jutland leaned forward in his chair.

"Now here's some information you won't relish," he advised the Counselor. "Ilrai has asked to be included in your party."

Sarrasen stiffened.

"I can't refuse him even if I wanted to, which I don't," Captain Jutland continued. "He has an official authorization a yard long, under the Bi-Planetary Seal, which permits him to go anywhere and to see anything—so long as in so doing he doesn't interfere with official work nor expose others to unreasonable hazards. If you prefer not to assume the counselorship under which such conditions I might offer you my permission to withdraw now, but I'm not going to do that either. It would do your record no good. If you persist in this attitude of irrational hostility toward Martians it will seriously limit your value to the Service. It's an obsession. It's an indication of emotional unbalance. You may as well face it and resolve to overcome it."

"This is an official disapproval of my personal opinions, I take it," remarked the Counselor coldly.

"I'm not concerned about your personal opinions if they don't reduce your serviceability, blast it!" exploded Captain Jutland. "And, strictly speaking, I'm not disapproving. I'm attempting an operation in mental surgery. Probably you think it's hatchet surgery, but that may be what your case calls for. Possibly we could cure you painlessly by hypnosis but I'd rather see you cure yourself.

"I don't have to be a master-mind to diagnose your ailment. You're accustomed to being versatile, able, more than ordinarily successful in your undertakings. So you feel everlastingly humiliated when you're detailed for training in mental transmission and find that you're a total bilateral incompetent. That's being juvenile. Only about five percent of the human race are A1 telepaths anyway, and another five percent are blackouts like you. The Martians are something else; their worst is better than our best. That's why the training is in their hands.

"There's nothing disgraceful in having an impenetrable mind. It involves no other deficiency. In fact, there's always a spot for anyone with a mind like that. No one else can project his thoughts into it and it can't inadvertently transmit its own. You should be elated that not even a Martian can tell what you're thinking. But no! You choose to go into a permanent fit of sulks and rationalize your failure with cockeyed theories. You accuse the Martians of deliberately withholding proficiency in the art from the major portion of the human race. Then you cite statistics regarding incidence of insanity among telepaths, and

declare that we're meddling with forbidden knowledge. And so on. You might just as fruitfully draw conclusions anent insanity among musicians, or criticize the Martians for possessing four arms instead of two, like sensible beings."

"Unless we have something further to say, there are other matters which need my attention," remarked Sarrasen with toneless formality.

"All right. That's all. Shove off, and the best of luck," Captain Jutland concluded. "Right now, I know, you'd be delighted to see me lashed to a meteorite and set adrift. But think it over."

CHAPTER II

THE CONTACT SHIP Hermes lay in her launching-tunnel, her nose pointed at the eighty-tone plug of the air-lock in the outer skin of the Caduceus. She was a hybrid craft, a stream-lined sea-going space cruiser; double-keeled to provide a firm base upon a solid surface and to permit stable navigation on a body of water for economy of lift-power.

Counselor Sarrasen faced his landing-party in the mess-room of the Hermes. Half the company were telepaths of various degrees of ability, and he was resentfully certain that a darting interchange of thought proceeded among them. His resentment focussed itself upon Ilrai, the unwitting symbol of what he conceived to be his humiliation. The Martian towered three feet above the heads of the Earthlings; his battery of eyes, equally spaced around the equator of his faceless cranium, rendered it impossible to judge at what point his attention was directed.

"In a few moments, when I give the word, the launching-tunnel will be evacuated of air," began Sarrasen, struggling to suppress an irritated conviction that Ilrai was not paying attention; although the Martian lacked organs of speech, like all members of his race, he possessed adequate hearing. "For some of us, as for me, this is the first time that we have been accepted for this kind of service. We are about to become, for an indefinite period, virtual exiles on a new world. We shall become laboratory animals just as truly as the humbler creatures we are taking with us. Let me repeat that, once we have landed, there will be no return until we are certain that we have not become carriers for some alien virus. Our results from the samples dredged up by the sounding-shells are hopeful but not conclusive. It may be that we shall be stricken by some malady which we cannot cure. Even the resources of the Caduceus may not develope a technique in time to save us; years of study may be necessary. We know that such things have happened. If, now that this venture is real and imminent in our minds, there are many who wish to withdraw, they may do so without prejudice. Ample replacements are available. This is the last chance."

A silence followed, in which Ilrai jotted down another entry in his interminable notes. The faint sound of scribbling annoyed Counselor Sarrasen. Ilrai wrote:

"I have seen little of this Earthling Sarrasen on the outward voyage. The absolute impregnability of his mind fascinates me. It is said that he harbors an unfaltering antipathy toward my race; certainly I have found him invariably aloof. Perhaps he will be more approachable after we have landed."

"Since no one speaks to the contrary we shall cast off at once," ordered Sarrasen. "Go to your stations."

The plug of the air-lock was a huge cylinder transverse to the tunnel, pierced by a tube. When the interior of the tunnel had been exhausted to a high vacuum the cylinder rotated smoothly, brought the tube into alignment with the tunnel, and the Hermes glided through into the star-dusted black in a transient misty puff of residual air-vapor and ice-crystals. She departed silently, driven by a space-warp mosaic—in less technical terms, by an invisible sheath of overlapping artificial gravitational fields under individual micro-control. The field-strengths could be varied over a range of twenty Earth-gravities, ten plus to ten minus —a relatively low velocity job.

Hooded instrument-lights glowed in the shadowy navigation-room, irradiated the hands of Counselor Sarrasen as they moved among the levers of the control-table. He was strapped to his seat in anticipation of a rough passage. On either side of him, also strapped in place, were Sancabriel his navigator and Himberling the chief pathologist, each capable of taking the helm if need arose. The eyes of all three were fixed on the conning-screen—a field of black quartered by luminous cross-hairs and powdered with stars like carelessly-strewn handfuls of shining sand. The globe of

a sapphire sun dominated the field, etched the three intent faces in tones of blue against the semi-obscurity.

"Azuran—our future sun for the rest of our lives, perhaps," quietly remarked Sarrasen.

"First time I've seen it like this," Himberling observed. "I haven't looked outside since the first week out of Alcorhaven. Beautiful corona—like a text-book picture of a magnetic field. This shows it in reduced intensity, of course."

"I should hope so!" returned the helmsman. "The screen couldn't reproduce its full intensity in the first place. It's a terrifically active star. We'll have no naked-eye views of it until we're under cover of an atmosphere—if the clouds ever break during the day. It built up an enormous static charge on the Caduceus and we're carrying part of that charge with us. Give me the bow televisor, Himberling."

With a click the picture was transformed and a planetary crescent appeared, close at hand and immense, fleecy with the texture of clouds, drenched with a soft celestial blue. A pinpoint sparkling of perpetual lightnings animated it from cusp to cusp. The dark part of the sphere was visible as a fragile-seeming veil of dim turquoise. Riding close above the curved rim of this shadowy veil was another, smaller crescent, a bright sickle of blue quicksilver.

"And it's down on the chart as AL237!" exclaimed Sarrasen. "What—what blasphemy!"

"I didn't know that it has a satellite," remarked Himberling.

The Hermes built up her down-drag to five gravities plus, then went neutral and coasted. The planet now loomed so enormous that only a small part of the dark side was visible on the conning-screen, but with a still obvious convexity.

"There must be a permanent auroral sheath under us in the high atmosphere," observed the Counselor. "It fogs the details. I haven't seen a continent or a big ocean on this side; just hundreds of islands. Himberling, cut in a filter and see if we can get rid of part of this blue veil; then intensify the image some more."

The conning-screen assumed a bluish-green tinge and the blurred archipelago became sharper in outline—dark masses on a slightly paler background.

"Head-braces!" ordered Sarrasen. "I'm going to decelerate."

THE three men slipped on helmets and chin-straps which were anchored to the high-backed seats. The helmsman flipped levers, began the slow turning of a dial, and the Hermes became negatively gravitating.

Instantly the three men were gripped by a fearful force which sought to tear them from their steel-framed chairs and hurl them against the control-table. Their retaining straps creaked and their heart-beats thudded in their ears.

"There's an odd sort of marking!" exclaimed Sancabriel sharply, his eyes fixed on the screen. "It's too symmetrical to be natural!"

The screen was almost entirely filled by the image of a large island. To the unaided human eye it would have been shrouded in darkness but the amplifying televisor rendered its topography dimly visible by reflected moonlight. At the head of an estuary in the upper right-hand quadrant of the screen a feebly luminous spot had appeared, circular in shape, with a regularly scalloped circumference. It suggested the outline of a conventionalized chrysanthemum. As the Hermes plummeted nearer the likeness became even more startling. Telescopic enlargement revealed an internal structure of pale-colored lines enclosing darker areas; specifically, they formed concentric zones of semicircular arcs—a precise representation of the over-lapping petals of a composite flower.

"To show this large, at our distance, it must be at least one hundred miles across," hazarded Sancabriel.

A shrill whine sang through the hull of the Hermes.

"First contact with atmosphere," observed Counselor Sarrasen. "We have nearly ceased falling. Now the jockeying begins."

The "jockeying" process was rather like a descent in an elevator. The Hermes would fall under positive gravity until her velocity and air-friction mounted unduly, then would go slightly negative for a few seconds, then positive again.

In the high stratosphere the vessel's huge static charge produced visible effects. She became enveloped in a nimbus of pale apple-green fire which fluttered from her double keel in ever-lengthening downward pennants. Searching auroral fingers rose up to meet them. As she dropped lower the normally calm nocturnal atmosphere around her began to churn with unaccus-

tomed commotion. During the intervals when portions of her enveloping gravitational mosaic were negative, air was forcibly repelled in those directions, rushed in shrieking from others and set up an atmospheric maelstrom. By the time she had dropped to a three-mile altitude the vessel was the nucleus of a vivid thunderstorm. She careened and plunged, while the clouds boiled around her and enmeshed her in a net of lightning. The bolts raked her impervious sheathing from stem to stern, spouted from her salient points in sheets of crashing flame.

When the synthetic storm had exhausted its first violence the Hermes drifted downward in a deluge of rain and hail, her apparent weight adjusted to slightly exceed her air-buoyancy.

"We're landing blind, just as if we had come down on the daylight side," grumbled Sarrasen, divesting himself of his safety-straps. "This planet has a very touchy atmosphere. I never saw a ship stir up such a tempest while making port on Alcorhaven. What's it like under us, Sancabriel?"

Sancabriel probed the cloudy depths with the echo-beam and reported,

"Flat as a table-top. We must be over water."

The Hermes first descended on a barely-submerged mud-flat, into which she began to sink with Gargantuan slobbering noises. To lift herself out she cautiously went negative. This maneuver hurled back water, mud, and boulders in a foaming elliptical tidal wave which returned, rumbling and frothing, when she went positive again, found and lowered herself into deeper water flowing smoothly and swiftly. A triad of bulges below the water-line at her stern opened up and broke our propellers. Another bulge on her shield-deck yawned apart and protruded a searchlight as she came about into the current and dropped anchor. The space-shields descended, whirring, from her observation ports.

"We'll ride here until the weather clears and decide on our next move," announced Counselor Sarrasen as he followed the disclosures of the searchlight beam with his binoculars, through the thick silicoid of a port. The beam was streaked with diamond darts of slackening rain. "I'd say we're on a river. There's one bank. And I suppose that's vegetation; it looks more like a forest of oversize sponges. Porous masses. Did you ever see such a malignant shade of green? Let's have a look at the port side."

The light-beam swung through half a turn and the observers moved across the navigation-room to another port.

"Do you see what I see?" demanded Sancrabriel.

An extraordinary barrier reared itself along the river's edge, its foundations planted in the water. It was the color of antique weather-beaten ivory, green-stained near water-level, pock-marked and pitted like a termite-eaten timber. Razor-edged spikes and bayonets of glassy stuff projected from its summit in a formidable fringe, which reflected sparks and sprays of light. The beam followed the structure along the river, found where it turned inland, mounted a ridge and passed over the crest.

"It's a wall, and it didn't just grow there," declared Himberling—an assertion which soon was to be proved correct only in part. "And whoever or whatever put it there was bent on keeping something out, something which was expected to come from this side."

CHAPTER III

THE light-beam had been extinguished. Insensibly the darkness around the Hermes took on an indigo tinge, a growing premonition of un-Earthly moonlight which struggled through the dissolving clouds. With the passing of those clouds, the river, its banks forested with spongy domes, and the spike-crowned wall became an insubstantial fantasy in ethereal blue, as remote from reality as Nirvana. The bright cerulean moon, nearing the full, rode in a sky like a theatrical back-drop —luminous blue-violet filmed over by an auroral haze which concealed all but the greater stars.

Counselor Sarrasen again had assembled his company in the mess-room, whose portholes looked across the blue-lit waters toward the enigmatic wall.

"Tomorrow, after we have rested, our work begins," he was saying. "Under no conditions is anyone to leave ship unprotected by safety-suits until we know more about the effects of our new atmosphere. And until we are more familiar with conditions on this world those who go out must not venture beyond—"

An overhead communicator clicked and

Sancabriel spoke from the navigation-room, where he had remained on watch.

"Something's coming over the ridge," announced Sancabriel. "You can see it from down there. It's making a ghastly noise. I'll cut you in on the outside mike."

There was a general movement to the port-holes as a deep-throated, lugubrious sound issued from the communicator. It might have been called either mooing or groaning. The lights in the mess-room were hurriedly switched off. Sarrasen still carried his binoculars slung over his shoulder and made haste to train them on the skyline of the ridge.

Near the horizon the violet-blue sky brightened to a lighter zone of blue-green, and against this zone of brightness was silhouetted what appeared to be the swaying neck and expanded hood of a giant cobra, featureless save for a row of four silver-blue luminous eyes. A tall, sharp horn rose from the creature's head like an obelisk.

The Hermes' light-beam leaped across the water, impinged upon this apparition, disclosed a craggy head and columnar neck encased in green-black jointed armor with a coppery iridescence. What had seemed to be an expanded hood revealed itself as a pair of flexible arms, tightly coiled against the armored neck just below the head. The creature hurriedly unfurled these arms, shaded its eyes against the glare with frog-fingered unhuman hands in an oddly human gesture, and began to advance stiffly, mechanically, as if fascinated by the intense light.

"It's half as high as the wall!" exclaimed Sancabriel. "Here comes the rest of it."

"How high is the wall?" thought Counselor Sarrasen.

The body of the beast was not unlike that of a great armor-plated caterpillar furnished with five pairs of stumpy elephantine legs. In the intervals between its dismal groaning a harsh panting was audible, like the laboring of giant lungs.

"That other sound isn't what you think it is," Sancabriel declared. "Our ten-legged friend ashore has nothing to do with it. It's from another direction—inland, toward the wall, and it's growing louder. Something else is astir. If I'm not mistaken it's creeping along in the shadow of the wall. We'll have a look."

The light-beam swung toward the wall and played along the portion which extended back from the river, then halted suddenly.

A dome of steel surmounted by a turret was lurching forward on tractor treads, close to the base of the wall. Twin jets of steam spurted rhythmically from its underbody and a thin cloud of pale vapor trailed in its wake.

Since it was no longer held in thrall by the Hermes' searchlight, the armored decapod now became aware of the clanking, hissing newcomer and charged upon it with guttural whooping, running with surprising agility upon its short legs. When a headlong crash seemed imminent, the steel turret rotated slightly and spat out a roaring jet of steam which enveloped the monster's head in a billowing white cloud. It recoiled from this assault, humping its body into an arch which lifted its middle pairs of feet from the ground, and pawed frantically at its head with its serpentine arms. Then it turned, pounded up the slope and over the ridge.

The onlookers aboard the Hermes turned thoughtful eyes upon each other.

"This complicates matters," commented Himberling, who stood beside Sarrasen. "We'll have to come to an understanding with whatever things built that machine before we can go on with our work. I'd like to see what's at the wheel."

Himberling's curiosity did not go long unsatisfied. The lumbering vehicle crept down to the water's edge, turned broadside on to the Hermes, and stopped. A door opened in the turret and a dark figure crawled out, stood erect on the dome. For a moment no one quite comprehended what they saw since they had expected some bizarre, unfamiliar creature.

"It's a man, a human being!" came Sancabriel's voice from the communicator. "Or is it? Is there such a thing as a black human being?"

Ilrai, who stood at the porthole beyond Himberling, was aware that the same question was disturbing many of the other minds about him, and so broadcast a thought.

"It is indeed true that what we see is a man," thought Ilrai. "A considerable proportion of the terrestrial human population is of the black variety, and have added their own unique contribution to Earth's culture. It is only because the human race has expanded so far and so rapidly that you have never heard of them, or have forgotten what you may have heard."

"Ilrai is right. We're spreading out too fast," affirmed Himberling when he had relayed Ilrai's remarks verbally to Counselor Sarrasen, who listened with cool politeness. "At least a third of this company have never heard of the black race."

"I have heard of black men but I've never seen one," returned the Counselor. "There are none on Alcorhaven. And there's no record of any previous landing on this world. We must go to this stranger and question him."

CHAPTER IV

HIMBERLING and two others emerged on the shield-deck of the Hermes. The others were Ilrai and a girl named Rodney Ames who possessed a specialized knowledge of terrestrial dialects. Possible difficulties were foreseen in conversing with the stranger but, as was soon discovered, Rodney's linguistic services were not needed. Ilrai had reported only slight success in attempting a mental contact.

"I receive no impression save that of great emotional turmoil, and he does not respond to my efforts," the Martian informed Himberling. "He may be only slightly receptive."

The three were clad in air-tight transparent safety-suits fitted with oxygen cylinders. The head-pieces were mere tough, transparent films stretched over a light framework—since they were subject to no inequality in pressure—which permitted ordinary conversation at close range between non-telepaths without the encumbrance of telephonic apparatus. As a routine precaution all were armed with small-caliber weapons intermediate between a pistol and a rifle, firing explosive rocket-bullets.

Strapped around their bodies were individualized adaptations of the space-warp drive known as levitation harness, which could reduce the apparent weight of the wearer and his equipment almost to zero, so that he was rendered air-buoyant if desired. Gravitationally, he became equivalent to a human-shaped vacuum-bubble in the air. Locomotion with this gadget consisted of a series of immense leaps, or a sort of air-swimming with collapsible bat-wings attached to the arms and body. Athletic aviation of this sort was practical only in relatively calm weather such as then prevailed.

Leaping in rapid succession the trio launched themselves from the shield-deck, arched like blue moths across the intervening water, guided themselves with dexterous flapping toward their objective. They descended a little distance from the perambulating dome and advanced with guns held discreetly at the ready, but were reassured by the behavior of the man from the machine.

He was trembling uncontrollably. When Himberling stepped into the garish spotlight of the Hermes' beam the stranger's legs went limp under him and he tumbled clumsily to his knees. In this posture he shambled toward Himberling, fell forward and clutched him around the hips.

Himberling was momentarily nonplussed by the stranger's eyes, which searched his own with a desperate incredulity. They were deep-set in a face which might have been carved from teak, seamed with wrinkles like gullies, under a skull-fitting growth of grizzled kinky hair. The stranger's lips moved but no words came forth.

"Here now! What's your trouble? Pull yourself together," said Himberling uncomfortably.

In response came two words, spoken hoarsely:

"How long?"

"He's a castaway!" ejaculated Rodney. "He wants to know how long he's been here!"

"A castaway, careering around in a steam-driven machine?" rejoined Himberling skeptically. Then, "Who are you? When did you land?"

"Mattawomba. In 2583. From the land of Kenia, on Earth. How long is that?"

"In 2583!" repeated Rodney. "Why—that's thirty-two years ago!"

"Only thirty-two? I couldn't tell. Time is different here."

"His mind is a whirl of strange pictures," Ilrai thought to Himberling. "I cannot yet piece them together. He is unaware of my thoughts; his brain has not been trained to listen."

"I can't get through to him either," Himberling thought back. "This will have to be a verbal interview."

With Rodney's assistance Himberling raised the shock-weakened Mattawomba to his feet and led him over to the machine, where they seated themselves on a projecting flange of the tread-casing. Ilrai folded up his long double-jointed legs and sat

before them on the ground. The Hermes' beam, shining upon him from the rear, irradiated his translucent body like an image of cloudy many-colored glass, revealed the shadowy outlines of his skeleton.

"Now tell us how you came here," continued Himberling. "Was there no one with you?"

"I was alone," said Mattawomba. "In a lifeboat of the Marco Polaris. Sudden death came to the ship. The captain died on the bridge. The pilot died at the helm."

"The Marco Polaris!" Ilrai flashed to Himberling. "I know that ship. It was lost in transit."

"What do you mean by sudden death?" demanded Himberling, professionally interested. "What was it like?"

"We can go into that afterwards," declared Rodney. "Go on."

"Some died while they ran to the lifeboats," Mattawomba went on. "No one came with me to mine. I was afraid to wait, so I went alone. This was the only planet in sight. I knew scarcely anything about navigation. So I came down very crookedly and crashed in the Outlands. I broke my wrist and three ribs and my watch. If I'd had my watch—"

"What do you mean by the Outlands?" asked Rodney.

"Out there," said Mattawomba, and gestured widely away from the wall toward the ridge and the river.

"Why was the Marco Polaris leaving Earth?" inquired Himberling, prompted by Ilrai.

"Because the people in it were weary of Earth," Mattawomba responded. "Life was changing strangely. Everything was in upheaval. Everywhere men and women seemed driven to throw themselves into some great scheme to change things. There was no more peace, no more solitude. Then we read in a book, in a spaceman's tale, about a world of Polaris. They said it was a Perfect World. It was written by a Martian named Ilrai—"

Ilrai started, his invincible equanimity shattered for the first time in years.

"That report was a bit premature," observed Himberling, smiling covertly. "It was rather hastily called Eden, as I remember. The first colonists were overwhelmed by spectacular landscapes and a wonderful climate, but it proved to be no better and no worse than Earth."

"Pardon the interruption," Rodney broke in, "but I think that some more local wild life is coming our way. I've heard it twice and I don't like its voice. It was louder the second time."

An attentive silence followed. Then the blue serenity of the night was sliced across by a shrill, hooting wail. The echoes ran around the horizon like a vast cry of despair.

CHAPTER V

RODNEY, Himberling, and Ilrai leaped to their feet and cocked their guns. Mattawomba remained seated, regarded them blankly.

A pencil of orange light wheeled up into the sky from behind the ridge, swept down to a horizontal position as the light-source leaped into view on the summit of the wall where it crested the rise. The light was rushing along the top of the wall toward the mystified watchers, accompanied by a harsh, throbbing hiss.

Rodney cried, "Now what?"

The nearest portion of the wall was no more than a hundred yards away, and that which now sped by upon it left Himberling and Rodney transfixed in inarticulate amazement. A wheeled, elongated contrivance of steel offered a fleeting glimpse of rounded metallic sides, hurried mechanical oscillations and pulsating steam-jets, to be followed by a clicking, clangorous succession of box-like carriages bearing strange inscriptions upon their corrugated sides: Santa Fe, Lackawanna, Missouri Pacific, and Fruit Growers Express.

The steam-spitting mechanism uttered a demoniac shriek as it passed, and rumbled on into the night, became two eyes of light —one red, one green—receding along the wall. Came another cry, remote, despairing, and was engulfed in blue silence.

Himberling drew a deep breath and inquired simply, "What was that?"

From a momentary state of rigidity Mattawomba passed into a paroxysmal abandonment to laughter. He was racked and shaken by whooping merriment. He slapped his knees, rocked his body in an agony of mirth, opened his mouth until it threatened to eclipse his face, exposed his teeth and tongue in unobscured entirety. He laughed until he wept. Neither Himberling nor Rodney had ever seen or heard such laughter.

"My little locomotive!" gasped Mattawomba, quaking with exhaustion and wiping his eyes. "You were afraid of my little locomotive!"

"Locomotive! Your little locomotive!" ejaculated Himberling, and paused helplessly. "Suppose we begin all over again."

"But it was little," Rodney asserted suddenly. "Take another look at the wall. We overestimated its size and distance when we saw it at first. It can't be more than thirty or forty feet high. And that would make that—that mechanical nightmare—"

"It would make it—," began Himberling, and eyed the wall. "Why, it wasn't any bigger than—than a big working model of—of what? Come, Mattawomba, tell us what goes on here."

"On Earth, I taught sidereal linguistics, the comparative philology of the known worlds," replied Mattawomba. "At the University of Kenia. In my studies I rediscovered the ancient jargon of Earthly railroading. Do you know what a railroad is?"

Himberling searched his memory, received a mental prod from Ilrai.

"They taught us in school on Alcorhaven," he responded, "that 'goods and passengers once were conveyed in steam-driven vehicles running on rails.' So that's what we saw! But how can there be a railroad on this world, with Earthly names on the cars—like 'Missouri Pacific,' for instance? Where do you come in?"

"I began by whittling railroads out of wood," continued Mattawomba. "Then I made them from brass and steel, complete and functional in every detail. It was my pastime. When we set out on the Marco Polaris I took with me a whole microfilm library on railroads. It was the only thing I carried into the lifeboat."

"So after you crashed, you crawled out with a wrist and three ribs broken," observed Rodney, "and built a railroad."

"I haven't told you the rest of it," returned Mattawomba with a toothful grin. "The Wall-Makers built their own railroads, after I showed them how. They already knew about steam-power and had invented a steam-driven road-carriage like this one we're sitting on. But they hadn't thought of rails, or wheels with flanges."

"The Wall-Makers!" repeated Himberling. "I knew it! Where there is a wall like this, there must be builders. It couldn't just grow."

"But it did," asserted Mattawomba. "It's alive."

"WHAT?" Himberling and Rodney spoke together.

"You might call it a sort of dry-land coral," Mattawomba explained. "The Wall-Makers cause it to grow wherever, and in whatever size and shape they want. The walls keep the Dinopods out."

"The. . . .Dinopods?" questioned Himberling.

"The Dinopods. It's just a name I invented. I named this world Kenia, also. It seemed—well—it seemed a good name."

"On the chart it goes, by virtue of thirty-two years' priority. But what are Dinopods?"

"The lords of the Outlands. You must have seen one. The one I scalded with steam."

RODNEY had been grappling with a problem and now voiced her perplexity.

"You say that these Wall-Makers had already invented machines like this one," she began, tapping the steel tread-casing. "Then you say that they have built railroads like the one on the wall. But those cars were miniatures. If I stood alongside one I believe I could lean my elbows on it. What good is a railroad on that scale?"

"This is my personal transport, especially made for me. It's a kind of tank—but probably you've never heard of that. The Wall-Makers are about so tall." (He extended his hand, indicated a height of two feet.) "The railroads are built in proportion. It happens that on this world the dominant race is small—small compared to man, small compared to the general scale of things about them."

"When may we meet these—these pygmy engineers?"

"When you wish. I came partly to arrange a meeting, partly to ask that you take me back to Kenia—the real Kenia. We saw your ship coming down in the storm, on fire with lightning."

"I'm afraid that you'll have to wait awhile before you can return," Himberling said, an apologetic note in his voice. "Under the best of conditions we ourselves will be here for years. When we do go it will be to Alcorhaven, not Earth, and our communications with Earth are very irregular. When we set out it had been five years since the last mail."

It now became necessary to acquaint Mattawomba with the functions of the Inter-World Sanitary Service, an organization regarding which he had only the sketchiest information.

"But I've lived here for thirty-two years," protested Mattawomba, "and I've enjoyed the best of health. I'm your Number One Guinea Pig. I'll admit that I made myself very sick several times before I knew what were the right things to eat, but as for a real infection—never!"

"Infection! I'm glad you mentioned that," Himberling rejoined. "You haven't told us what this 'sudden death' was that struck the Marco Polaris."

"There was a panic. It was hard to find out just what was happening. But it was called, I think, Cassiopeian gangrene."

Rodney and Himberling involuntarily moved away from Mattawomba, cast startled glances at each other.

"And you got away alive!" exclaimed Himberling incredulously.

"There's a latent form," Rodney observed. "Very likely that's how it came aboard the Marco Polaris."

"You mean—" began Mattawomba, and stopped.

"The kindest thing I can do is to be brutally frank," began Himberling hesitantly. "Presumably you have been exposed to Cassiopeian gangrene. It is one of the most devilishly erratic diseases known, and may lie dormant in an unsuspecting host for an amazingly long time. The fact that you survived renders you subject to suspicion. Even if it were but the faintest of suspicions, before you can be allowed to return to Earth, or even to Alcorhaven, you must undergo the most complete and searching examinations known to medical science. In fact, we and all the crew of the Hermes—the ship itself—are from this moment under ironclad redoubled quarantine on Kenia. We may be here for life."

CHAPTER VI

A FRANTIC WARNING from Sancabriel sounded in Himberling's brain. The beam of the Hermes' searchlight whirled away from the group on the river bank, leaped up the slope of the ridge, and revealed a long rank of Dinopods creeping stealthily over its summit in open formation. The line was so extended that Sancabriel could not hold the beam upon more than one individual at a time.

"You go back to the ship!" commanded Mattawomba. "I'll get through."

He ran up the curved side of the dome on a built-in ladder, dived into the turret, slammed the door.

"Tell him to get out of that contraption!" Sancabriel flashed to Himberling. "We're unlimbering the forward guns. I don't know how these brutes' minds work, but if I were in their place I'd surround that machine and overturn it, steam or no steam. And if they surround it we can't shoot at them without blowing it up along with them."

But Mattawomba's travelling fortress was already rumbling on its way in a cloud of steam and oil-fumes.

Now that they had been discovered, the phalanx of Dinopods thundered down the slope like stampeding elephants. For the first time the party on the shore appreciated their true size; each shell-plated neck was as thick as the body of a horse.

Then the guns of the Hermes spoke, and apparently simultaneous explosions blasted three smoking craters in the hillside. One Dinopod was decapitated by a shell.

The concussion staggered the remaining Dinopods, and the trio at the river's edge —who had already rendered themselves practically weightless—were blown backwards over the water. The headless victim of the salvo blundered onward with stubborn vitality, rammed against the wall. Then a prodigy took place. The wall came to life.

Out of the honeycomb of dark pits in the pock-marked barrier there arose legions of long-stemmed polyps like giant sea-anemones, rosy and beautiful under the Hermes' restless beam, their tentacles tipped with curved black fangs. They seized the thrashing body hungrily, held it by sheer force of numbers, pried off its plates of armor with their talons, and proceeded to tear it to shreds. The polyps actually engaged in this demolition passed on the morsels to their more distant fellows as an ever-widening area of the wall awakened to activity. In an appallingly short space of time they had reduced their prize to a tattered skeleton and withdrew into their lairs.

Recovering from their temporary disorganization, the attackers surrounded Mattawomba even as Sancabriel had foreseen. The revolving turret belched steam like an

angry dragon. A quartet of Dinopods succeeded in laying hold of the machine and tilting it sidewise before they were driven off. Immediately the turret spouted an upward column of steam and uttered a deafening hoot. It seemed that answering hoots mingled with the ensuing echoes.

Ilrai and his companions were still hovering above the river and drifting backward toward the Hermes from the force of the explosions.

"Perhaps these little weapons of ours may be of some slight assistance in this encounter," thought the Martian as he drove himself upward with a couple of vigorous flaps and leveled his gun at a Dinopod which was circling in toward the steam-enshrouded dome.

The recoil of Ilrai's shot threw him halfway to the Hermes. The red streak of his rocket-bullet, enhanced to crimson in the blue moonshine, stabbed the broad back of the Dinopod, exploded there into a blood-red star of flame.

And now the voyagers from Alcorhaven beheld another one of Kenia's grim surprises. The flare of the bursting bullet continued to burn, spread over the Dinopod's back in slow rivulets of fire. The creature uttered a dreadful cry, twisted its long neck backward, beat at the flame with its hands—and the hands themselves ignited.

"Great balls of fire!" shouted Himberling with unpremeditated aptness. "The thing's combustible!"

"I'm sick!" choked Rodney, turned and fled through the air to the Hermes.

The other Dinopods were stopped in their tracks by the spectacle of the slow transformation of their comrade into a writhing, horrendously vocal conflagration. Then they fled up the hillside in wild retreat.

The retreat became a rout when they found themselves confronted by a compact battle-line of quarter-size replicas of Mattawomba's machine, sweeping down from the ridge to a hooting accompaniment of shrill steam-sirens and preceded by a wall of live steam. The battle-line became a crescent, drove them headlong into the river. Their towering horns plowed desperately across the blue-sparkling current, passed close under the bows of the Hermes.

Ashore, the now motionless Dinopod burned down to a smoldering patch of red coals, bones and all.

CHAPTER VII

IN THE quiet of his cabin aboard the Hermes Ilrai flattened out the first page of a new journal with his big rubbery fingers and proceeded to fill it with vertical columns of twisted Martian script.

"In a sense I am responsible for our predicament," Ilrai wrote. "When I published the Eden story I was careful to point out that it had come to me by a long and devious route, passing from world to world by word of mouth and probably gaining much in the telling. It never occurred to me that Earth might harbor a sufficient number of dreamers to embark upon such an ill-advised pilgrimage as the Marco Polaris expedition, merely on the strength of that story. Of the Marco Polaris I heard only that it set out with a party of colonists and vanished without trace. Now that story has trapped us on Kenia. We were warned by our leader that unpredictable events might bring about such a situation, but I think that very few of us really believed that it might happen so.

"We have seen much of these Wall-Makers in the days since our first meeting with Mattawomba. The Earthlings are individualists with a genius for things mechanical. The Martians are individualists with a genius for things metaphysical. Both learned the lesson of unity only at the price of bloodshed and battle. But the Kenians, living in what is to them a giant world, possess an innate devotion to unity. They could not have survived and become what they are otherwise. Their peculiar genius is biological; they mold living things to their ends as the Earthlings mold the inorganic world. Until relatively recent times theirs was—let us say—a biocultural civilization without machines. They were ripe for a mechanical era when Mattawomba arrived.

"The entire race of Wall-Makers is congregated in one vast community behind the living walls. As their numbers increased they made successive additions to the circumference of this area, which now measures one hundred forty miles in diameter. Only the outer walls are alive, kept so by feeding upon the organisms floating in internal circulating streams of water sucked up from the sea and whatever incidental creatures are snared by the polyps. Mattawomba has fancifully christened the com-

munity Chicagua, since his researches have revealed that this terrestrial city once constructed railroads on elevated tracks. The symmetrical network of walls—a growth of ages—was sighted from the Hermes during its descent on Kenia.

"The Wall-Makers themselves are strangely reduced, delicate variations of the Dinopod pattern. If one can imagine a plump, worm-like being, standing with the forward half of its body erect and armored with the jointed carnapace of an armadillo, he will have a general idea of the Wall-Maker antatomy. The carapace is mottled with tortoise-shell markings. Like the Dinopods they possess twelve limbs but stand on eight only. The other four are grasping organs, multi-fingered as the fronds of a fern. Four opalescent eyes peer from under a vizor-like projection of the head-shell. The fabric of their minds is puzzling, cryptic but friendly; I can plumb only the shallows of their thoughts.

"The continual encroachments of the Kenians on the surrounding Outlands are resented by the creatures which Mattawomba appropriately calls the Dinopods—the thunder-footed. I know of no exact parallel to these beasts elsewhere. They are less intelligent than the Wall-Makers, more intelligent than the elephants of Earth or the araganths of Alcorhaven. They have hands, and a barbaric type of culture. I am told that they have communities of their own, but these I have not seen.

"Possibly I am mistaken, but I feel that Counselor Sarrasen was antagonized by my shooting of a Dinopod. At least his manner seemed to convey such an attitude. He was not concerned about the one which was slain by a shell from the Hermes."

An entry in Counselor Sarrasen's private log verifies the disapproval which Ilrai suspected. In it he disparages Ilrai's exploit as "sheer exhibitionism," claiming that the patrol of Wall-Maker machines was already visible on the crown of the ridge at the moment when Ilrai fired his shot. He avers that the cremation of the Dinopod violated the established policy which prohibits "wanton and unreasonable destruction of fauna." Other unrelated entries reveal that Counselor Sarrasen cherished a secret pride in his prowess as a hunter of big game—for scientific purposes. There may or may not be a connection between these facts.

Sarrasen also expresses himself regarding Ilrai's "Eden story" in much the same words as the Martian, with an added angry comment that Ilrai would do well to make sure of his facts before bursting into print.

CHAPTER VIII

MATTAWOMBA was primarily a teacher and student of languages. Within the field of his model-building hobby he was well-versed in the theory of steam-engines and the construction of railroad equipment; beyond that his technical knowledge was nil. But contact even with this small fraction of terrestrial science, together with the African's tantalizingly general descriptions of other Earthly achievements, had fired the Wall-Makers with an avid desire for more. Neither of the parties to this interchange of ideas was physiologically capable of acquiring the speech of the other, but early in his residence on Kenia Mattawomba had mastered the written language of the Wall-Makers. So it was through Mattawomba that the Hermes was invited to shift her moorings from the river to an anchorage inside the walls, far from the Dinopods—who had developed a disagreeable urge to pelt the ship with boulders and gobbets of decomposing offal, as was already their custom to throw at trains. Her new berth was the arm of a lake, adjacent to a railroad terminal. The terminal shops constantly grew more serviceable for certain minor needs of the Hermes, under the expert advice of Sancabriel and others.

After checks and re-checks a hundredfold repeated, Counselor Sarrasen admitted what he scarcely dared to hope—the atmosphere of Kenia was safe. Safety-suits were ceremoniously discarded, the Hermes flung open her ports, and the voyagers inhaled heady drafts of the richly-oxygenated air, knew once again the feel of wind and rain. The ship admitted a delegation of Kenians, who inspected her from deepest hold to shield-deck, chirping and babbling with wonder.

On this epochal day Mattawomba conferred with Counselor Sarrasen in the latter's cabin.

"In one way this may be good news to you; in another way it isn't," began Sarrasen, drawing luxuriously on a long-deferred cigarette of Alcorhavian tobacco (it burned very rapidly in the Kenian atmosphere). "There isn't the slightest doubt but you contracted Cassiopeian gangrene. Two things saved you: a high natural resistance and the fact that you made Kenia in a hurry. This

high-oxygen atmosphere inhibits the disease. You still have a slight latent infection of the spleen but the lesion is healing and it isn't contagious, and it never will be if you stay on Kenia. We can cure it, but it will take a long time. Even if we were permitted to send you back to Earth now—and could—you'd have to spend at least five years in an oxygen chamber after you got there, isolated in a remote Antarctica hospital. And we'll be here longer that that. We haven't done a tenth of what we know we must do."

The creases in Mattawomba's face seemed to deepen.

"I feared something like this," he said slowly. "But I shall have many things to do, and time will pass swiftly. Ilrai has been training me to listen with my brain, as he terms it. And there is something at the terminal shops which you must see."

At the mention of Ilrai's name Counselor Sarrasen elevated one eyebrow and inhaled so strongly that his cigarette emitted a shower of sparks and burned nearly to his lips. He hastily spat the glowing stub on the deck and ground it vindictively under his heel as if Ilrai were responsible for the incident.

"Very well. Let's shove off," he curtly assented.

From the Hermes they came forth into the ultramarine dusk of the Kenian day, filled with the drumming roar of a solid downpour of rain and the unremitting roll of thunder. The clouds rippled with lightning, and their infrequent transitory rifts were stabbed through by steel-blue broadswords of sunlight.

The two men splashed across a wide field among close-set ranks of five-foot spheres, glistening darkly through the rain—the swift-growing vegetable bladders which secrete the fuel-oil of Kenia. Beyond this they picked their way through a network of narrow tracks, stepped cautiously between miniature ten-foot tank-cars which stood in long files upon the sidings.

Sarrasen paused and regarded the lights of the shops, a watery blue-white blur through the descending torrent.

"Have the Kenians invented a new kind of oil-lamp?" he demanded. "They were never so bright before."

"You'll see," grinned Mattawomba.

Stooping through a rugged archway of coralline material—dead and devoid of polyps—the Earthlings stood with their heads nearly touching the roof and surveyed a brilliantly lighted labyrinth of clamorous little machines, spinning pulleys, and flapping belts. Scores of quadruple eyes glanced up expectantly from their work.

"Arc lights!" cried Sarrasen. "Who did this?"

"Several people," Mattawomba informed him, grinning delightedly. "The Wall-Makers, Ilrai and I. Now we can have motors and do away with all these belts and pulleys. On Earth, I got all the electrical devices for my models ready-made. When I came, we tore down all the gadgets in the lifeboat and still knew nothing when we had ruined them. But Ilrai brought at least a ton of books and microfilms with him on the Hermes. He dug up some stuff on elementary electrical engineering, dictated telepathically while I wrote it out in the Kenian tongue. Sancabriel was in it, too; he helped with the mathematical part and the shop-work. We've made a direct-current dynamo of sorts, but it does work."

BUT Counselor Sarrasen said nothing. He stood quite still, his face a mask, while the water dribbled from his rain-suit. The glow of pleasure slowly faded from Mattawomba's eyes and he became crestfallen.

"What's the matter?" inquired Mattawomba anxiously. "Isn't it all right?"

"I did not order this to be done," observed the Counselor icily. "Unfortunately we cannot revoke this technical information which already has been released. In releasing it, you have committed a flagrant violation of general policy. The regulations explicitly prohibit the very thing that you have done. They clearly forbid us to supply scientific information to any species capable of using it before we are thoroughly familiar with its temperament and mental attitudes."

"But I *am* thoroughly familiar with the Wall-Makers!" protested Mattawomba. "What are you driving at?"

Both turned at the sound of Himberling's voice behind them.

"As I recall the wording of the regulations," said Himberling, "they forbid 'the disclosure of the theory and methods of production of any lethal weapon, implement of war, explosive, toxic gas, incendiary device, or any other socially destructive information.' They also say something about 'means of navigation in vacuo.' Are you going to tell us that you consider an arc-light an im-

plement of war or a socially destructive influence?"

"You choose to be trivial," retorted Counselor Sarrasen. "Are you prepared to guarantee that from this innocent-seeming arc-light and the generator which activates it, these Wall-Makers will not go on to the incandescent bulb, the simple vacuum tube, the cyclotron, nuclear physics, the stereodyne, and the space-warp drive? Even our superior Martian friend admits that, so far, he can understand only the simplest mental patterns of these beings. Can you see into their minds? Even if you could, could you be sure that you saw everything?"

"Suppose they do go on to these other things? What then?" countered Himberling.

"They are obviously a nimble-witted and inventive race, and quick to learn," responded the Counselor. "I presume that you have no forebodings as to what they will do when they escape from the confinement of these walls, occupy their world, and overrun the galaxy."

"Yes, I have no forebodings," affirmed Himberling stoutly. "Mattawomba's thirty-two years of association with the Wall-Makers give his opinions a weight that should out-balance all of ours put together. And as to their over-running the galaxy, don't be foolish. We're doing quite a bit of over-running ourselves, and there have been times and places when the galaxy didn't appreciate it."

"But our purposes are benevolent!" ejaculated the scandalized Counselor.

"Are you hinting that the Kenians would ever be anything but benevolent?" boomed Mattawomba in a voice that was heard throughout the terminal.

"This is not a military organization which for the first time I regret," Counselor Sarrasen remarked ominously. "We are all responsible adults, theoretically, and we know the regulations. But as field director of this survey I promise you that if any more technical information is given to the Wall-Makers I shall report for insubordination everyone who may be responsible, as soon as we have made port on Alcorhaven. Ilrai's case I shall present directly to the Bi-Planetary Governors."

"Cool off," advised Himberling. "You won't see Alcorhaven again for ten years. And as for preferring charges on Earth—well, you know how often the mail goes out. You won't even remember it by then."

He grasped Sarrasen by the arm.

"You need a walk in the rain," said Himberling. "I'm dissecting a Dinopod. It's a rare sight. You'll enjoy it.'

Mattawomba squatted dejectedly between two axle-lathes, produced an affair like a flexible slate from a water-proof pouch at his belt—he disdained a rain-suit—and began a solemn written conversation with the Wall-Makers who imediately surrounded him.

CHAPTER IX

"I EXPECTED a whole Dinopod; this is just a head and neck," remonstrated Counselor Sarrasen. "And why did you break the horn?"

His Huntsman's eye perceived the grisly bulk as a damaged trophy. It lay under a low-vaulted pergola which had been grown, not built, illuminated by a pair of sizzling arc-lights. On every side were archways curtained by rain, opening on a world of crepuscular blue.

"I didn't break it," Himberling replied, flexing his fingers in his surgical gloves. "This fellow did it himself, last night, in a fight to the finish with another gladiator. It was just outside the wall. You should have seen it. They wrestled and tore up the ground like a couple of power-shovels running amuck. He didn't win, as you might guess. When it was all over Mattawomba took me out in his tank and we severed this much and dragged it in. The remaining carcass was worthless; the Outlands scavengers had been at it."

"Where's the rest of the horn?"

"It was sticking in the victor's rump when I last saw it, and he was ringing the welkin about it. You had better put on a respirator; this odor doesn't seem so bad but it will lay you low if you breathe too much of it. Now here's something. This armor-plate, these bones—they're wood. Don't look so skeptical. Its incredibly tough and almost as hard as iron. But it's wood. The whole animal is oily and resinous inside. But it is an animal and not a plant—I guess."

"The horn also?"

"Yes, the horn is wood also. I suppose it was rammed in between two other bones—we'll have to call them that—and something had to give. And here's another thing. I've dissected out an eye. Fixed lens, moveable retina. Very curious."

"You have surely made a wreck of this," lamented Sarrasen, walking around the part-

Hooded instrument-lights glowed in the shadowy navigation room, irradiated the hands of Counselor Sarrason as they moved among the levers of the control-table.

ly dismembered head. "You should have another one, complete, to dissect in its entirety."

He found himself confronting Rodney, masked and gloved, who until then had been occupied with the muscles of a massive arm and hand on the other side of the huge cranium and completely hidden by the latter.

"I heard you," said Rodney, "and I know just what you're thinking. You'll go and bag a Dinopod for scientific purposes, and when we start work on it you'll claim the head because—you'll say—we've already had this one. Then you'll take it back to Alcorhaven and hang it on the wall in your quarters, opposite the araganth."

"It's an idea," returned Sarrasen, unabashed.

"Why don't you?' urged Himberling, speaking across the snout of the Dinopod. "I think we all need and deserve a holiday. I'm taking mine right now, carving up this beast. For eighteen months I've seen nothing but slides and cultures and photographs and caged animals. Mattawomba will give you expert advice on organizing the hunt."

"THIS is a map of Chicagua," announced Mattawomba, unrolling a bulky scroll of vegetable parchment. He spread it upon a circular table of spongy mineral material in the form of an inverted truncated cone, which had been caused to grow from the floor of the chamber he used as a work-room. Above it, a coralline stalactite supported a cluster of Kenian oil-lamps shaded by translucent marine shells which diffused a mellow orange light. The microfilm projector stood in an alcove. The walls were a museum of railroad models interspersed with files of mechanical drawings.

"It looks like a big flower," Rodney commented, bending over the map.

"A chrysanthemum, to be exact," amended Sarrasen. "We saw it from the *Hermes*, coming down."

"You'll notice this long straight wall extending thirty miles to the northwest and ending in a loop," Mattawomba continued. "That's the causeway I told you about. It's complete and the growth has been halted, except for the loop at the end, which is just beginning to grow. The loop is about seven miles across and encircles a mountain of iron ore. A four-track railway is already laid down along the causeway, and when the loop has reached its full height we'll extend the line and start taking out the iron. A clan of Dinopods formerly lived on the mountain. They're still incensed about being driven off, and have built themselves another kraal somewhere in the vicinity. At night, when the foraging parties come out, you shouldn't have much difficulty in locating a specimen. Usually they come up to the causeway and heave a few dornicks at it, just on general principles. But I can't guarantee that you'll get your specimen after you bring it down. They carry away their dead and wounded."

"We'll fascinate them with a small portable searchlight," explained Sarrasen. "Then I'll select my Dinopod and pick it off at leisure with a Humboldt rifle—the same one I used for the araganth. It fires a steel-jacketed non-explosive bullet. Will you handle the light, Mattawomba?"

"I'll use a steam-jet in self-defense," replied Mattawomba with a grimace. "But this lying in wait and calculated slaughter—No, I'll have nothing to do with it except to provide advice, and transportation to the end of the causeway. Your purpose is legitimate enough, but just the same—count me out."

"Let me take the light; I'll be the decoy," volunteered Rodney. "But tell me this: How do you intend to bring back your Dinopod after you get it?"

"Heavy-duty levitation harness," answered Sarrasen. "You've seen it. On bales and crates when we load or unload cargo. Four five-ton units should be enough to float a Dinopod. One of Mattawomba's locomotives will tow it in, like a captive balloon."

"Why don't you take one of the launches?" Rodney inquired, referring to certain aircraft auxiliaries of the *Hermes*.

"They're all out making surveys," the Counselor informed her. "None of them will return in time. We're going out tonight."

CHAPTER X

UNDER a full moon the Outlands had become a panorama of endlessly-varigated blues. Rodney was not yet sufficiently accustomed to these blue nights of Kenia to accept them as completely real; for her they still possessed a certain dream-like quality. She lay prone in a swaying, jolting ten-foot railway gondola, clutching the case of a portable spotlight. Counselor Sarrasen reclined in the other end of

the car, his Humboldt rifle and its folded tripod across his knees. A scudding streamer of oil-fumes and exhaust steam from the locomotive billowed overhead. Peering forward past the side of the tender and the spinning drivers, Rodney squinted against a barrage of pelting steam-droplets at four parallel pairs of rails which converged toward a dark blue butte on the horizon. Eight silvery-blue splashes of moonlight fled along the rails, keeping pace with the orange glow of the headlight. Four other gondolas and a caboose followed the first car, creaking and clanking; they carried rolls of heavy-duty levitation harness, Himberling, Sancabriel, others of the *Hermes'* company, and the Kenian train-crew. It was Himberling's intention to secure specimens of other nocturnal Kenian fauna after assisting in the transport of the Dinopod carcass.

"There must be another train ahead of us, near the end of the line," Rodney announced as they drew near the iron mountain. "I see two lights, red and green."

Sarrasen craned over the side of the gondola, scanned the two luminous dots, and shook his head uncomprehendingly.

At the end of the causeway the thirty-foot right-of-way expanded into a circular platform. The hunting-party drew up alongside another train consisting of a locomotive, two gondolas, and a caboose. Mattawomba was stretched out comfortably in a gondola, his head pillowed on his arms, contemplating the moon and smoking a cigarette—a luxury obtained from the *Hermes*—while he blew occasional smoke-rings for the edification of his Kenian train-crew.

"Why are you here?" inquired Counselor Sarrasen.

"I came out with Ilrai," replied Mattawomba, raising his head with his clasped hands.

"Ilrai!"

"Yes. He comes out here frequently to take pictures. The wild life is more plentiful than it is nearer to Chicagua. See! There goes one of his flashes."

A soundless white flare blinked among the northward ridges of the Outlands.

"Is he alone?"

"Why not? He's wearing levitation harness. He knows about your plans and is going to keep well away from the river."

"You mean the river that loops around the other side of Iron Mountain?"

"That's it. I want to tell you something about it. If you fly half a mile due north from here you'll come to a place where the Dinopods go down to grub around in the river-bottom. The shore is all trampled to a quagmire and there are three islands opposite. There's another bed of mussels—that's not what they are but one can call them that—about one mile upstream, under a bluff with a copse of sponge-trees at its foot."

THE chevaux-de-frise of horny spikes and blades along the rim of the circular platforms was broken at two points where the mountain-encircling loop branched off. At these points the causeway sloped steeply downward from its thirty-foot elevation, graded into northerly and southerly extensions entirely covered with the defensive polyps. To the Earthlings the embryonic walls suggested broad, slightly elevated beds of animated, pallid blue-white flowers.

Rodney and Counselor Sarrasen stood poised at the northerly break in the protective fringe, Rodney's spotlight was secured by straps around her neck and waist; the Counselor's gun and tripod were slung across his back, thereby leaving arms and hands free. They pressed the weight-control studs on their belts, leaped, flapped, and soared northward.

"There's the river and the three islands under us," said Rodney after an interval of leaping and soaring. "I'll sail around and look for Dinopods while you go down and set up your gun."

The huntsman found the trampled muddy shore as Mattawomba had foretold and established himself on a knoll which commanded every approach. The back-plates of Dinopods—which slough off periodically—lay all about him.

Rodney's voice came to him through the radiophone headset which his telepathic deficiency made necessary.

"The forest is too thick around here," announced Rodney. "I'm following a couple of Dinopods now but I can get only glimpses of them, down under the sponge-trees, and I haven't been able to get at them with the light at the right angle. Now they're coming out into a clearing under me. I'll catch their eye now—No! They saw one of Ilrai's flashes and went off that way to investigate. They're under the trees again."

Sarrasen fumed. He also had seen the flash, and was glaring toward the point

where he had seen it when an erect black object appeared on the summit of a distant hill. It stood out sharply against the blue-green auroral zone which rimmed the horizon. His first thought was that it was the head and neck of a Dinopod. Immediately he pivoted his rifle toward it, threw himself prone, and clapped his eye to the range-finder. Just as he found the object with this instrument it extended a pair of wings, flapped, and floated upward.

No sooner had he realized that his rifle was trained on Ilrai than a murderous impulse leaped from the crypts of his subconscious like a flicker of dark lightning. If he had fired half a second sooner it would have been a mistake. Why couldn't he have fired sooner by that half a second? Even if he fired now, who could say that it hadn't been a mistake?

"You could—," came Rodney's clear voice like the voice of sanity, with a startling appropriateness which stilled his tightening finger on the trigger. "You could—move upstream—to the other place that—Mattawomba spoke of."

Pause.

"I'm all out of training," Rodney went on. "This flapping wears me down. I'm sitting on top of a sponge-tree getting my wind. I was about to say that the forest thins out north of here, and I'll stand a better chance of luring a Dinopod into the open. If you move upstream I'll try to bring one to you there."

"Check. I'm taking off in half a minute," mumbled the Counselor, still somewhat distraught, and began to dismount his rifle.

As he leaped and glided along the river-bank toward the appointed place Rodney spoke again.

"I've spotted a fair-sized herd," she informed him. "They're headed for the river. In a minute they'll be out in the open and there are no trees from there on. There's a beaten trail to the river. Here's one coming out of the trees now, ahead of the rest! I've turned the light full in its face. This should be easy. It follows like a dog on a leash. Are you ready?"

"I'm not quite there yet, but I think I see the place," responded Sarrasen, leaping prodigiously, "I can see your beam distantly, to starboard."

He overshot the bluff rising from its cluster of sponge-trees, reversed his course, and in his haste to descend and mount his gun he came down less circumspectly than he might have done otherwise.

The Dinopod trail came down to the shore of a deep cove, partly enclosed on the upstream side by a curved rocky peninsula. Against this arm of land a backwater eddy had accumulated a mass of miscellaneous floating debris which had been invaded by vegetation from the shore; it was matted together into a solid raft with a resilient peaty surface, anchored by water-roots and creeping stems rooted on land. Even to an unhurried inspection, by illumination other than blue moonlight, it would have appeared deceptively solid.

Sarrasen descended on this surface and released the support of his harness when his feet were yet a few inches above it. The resulting impact of his full weight plus that of his equipment ruptured the fibrous raft and plunged him most disconcertingly into a slimy tangle of river flotsam. For a moment he clung to the edge of the opening he had made, digging his fingers into the crumbling peat, and called in to his radiophone:

"Rodney! Sancabriel! I'm—"

THEN the weight of his rifle and tripod tore him loose from his insecure grip and he found himself submerged in a repulsive web of slippery mud-coated roots, nondescript floating matter, and inky black water. With grim rapidity he slipped off the shoulder-strap which supported his weapon, battled his way back to the surface against a nauseating, glutinous, clinging resistance. For a moment he was dismayed by his inability to find the hole through which he had plunged, and clawed among the roots on the underside of the floating mat. It was like thrusting his fingers into a nest of angleworms. He broke surface gasping, trod water, felt for the studs on his belt. The lift-power of the harness responded soddenly, raised his shoulders only half a foot from the water. The apparatus had not been designed to withstand total immersion, and his wings had become involved with driftwood.

"I'm stuck in a bog!" he broadcast to whomever might hear. "My harness has hardly any lift in it. Tell Mattawomba it's at the foot of the bluff. I think I can hang on for a few minutes."

But no one heard him and his earphones brought no reply, because his radiophone was not adapted to submarine service either

—which he realized as soon as he had spoken.

However, his first cry — abruptly cut short—had been heard. A rapid interchange by direct mental communication took place between Rodney, Ilrai, and the party on the causeway. Rodney being nearest was the first to arrive, having followed the Dinopod trail to the river. Her spotlight revealed Counselor Sarrasen's features, unrecognizably besmeared, in the midst of the bog. She detached the light and set it on the shore with the beam directed vertically, as a beacon.

"Don't walk on this stuff!" warned the Counselor. "It's a mere crust with deep water under it."

"My harness won't lift both of us," said Rodney as she manoeuvered into a position above him. "But you can hang on to my feet until the others get here."

The full power of Rodney's harness lifted her companion from the water scarcely to his waist.

"I believe I can thrash my legs around and break a way through this mess to the shore, if you'll tow me along," declared Sarrasen, but did not execute the plan.

The bedazzled Dinopod which Rodney had abandoned, had reverted to its original intention of coming down to the river to grub in the shallows. It announced itself by uttering a deep bass groan and smashing the spotlight with a sweep of its horn. It then proceeded to pick up objects alongshore and fling them at the two Earthlings.

A hematite pebble slogged into the morass, further bespattering the Councelor's face with muck. A burr-like mass the size of a baseball sang past Rodney's ear. Her lurch to avoid it caused her to wheel downward about the pivot of her foot anchored in Sarrasen's grasp. She smacked solidly against the soggy, felted surface—thrust an arm into its gelatinous depths. Both began a series of lunges toward the open water while further missiles threw up muddy geysers about them. The fibrous mat started to break up under this double assault. Little islands of it drifted out into the stream. A forceful current gripped the pair and swept them beyond the range of the Dinopod's bombardment.

"Our harness is so much dead weight," gasped Sarrasen. "Get rid of it!"

So while they rose and sank in the frothy swirl of the disintegrating bog, gagging on involuntary mouthfuls of mucid water filled with ambiguous particles and fibers, the two laboriously divested themselves of their detachable equipment. It was in a small way consoling to remember that eighteen months' research had disclosed no aquatic organisms which were pathogenic toward terrestrial beings.

"What do we do now?" queried Rodney, floating face upward.

"Strike out for shore."

"Of course. But which way is it?"

Their eyes, close to water-level, perceived only a rippling bubble-studded blue expanse in all directions, under a stratum of mist. Overhead there was nothing but the glowing violet-blue sky, the blue coldness of the indifferent moon, a few great stars.

"I'm going to contact Ilrai—," Rodney began, then uttered a choking gurgle and was silent. A giant eddy had engulfed her. Through the turbid medium Sarrasen saw her spinning like a top, a dim blue shape under the point of the vortex.

CHAPTER XI

THE BAFFLED Dinopod stamped impatiently, glared with its four moonstone eyes into the blue river-mist which had covered the escape of the pair of strange animals. It surged into the water a few paces, raising billows worthy of a side-wheel steamer, uttered an angry woomp! when it trod on the sunken Humboldt rifle. Plunging its head and neck beneath the surface, it bubbled like a hippopotamus while it sought for and retrieved the weapon and its tripod. Then it sloshed ashore, trailing strings of water-weeds, to examine its find.

The simplicity of the tripod was uninteresting and the Dinopod cast it aside after bending and twisting it with its huge bands—strange hands, with a long central finger from which two rows of other fingers sprouted on either side, in the same manner that the veins grow from the midrib of a leaf. But it was intrigued by the trimness and complexity of the rifle, and when the remainder of the herd appeared the gun was passed from hand to hand to be felt and inspected.

Their inspection was cut short by the sound of steam-sirens which heralded the approach of a Kenian tank-patrol. The entire herd stampeded up the trail toward

the protection of the forest, taking the rifle with them.

Scarcely three minutes had been occupied by the encounter of Sarrasen and Rodney with the Dinopod, and their subsequent escape. No greater lapse of time had occurred from them until the retreat of the Dinapod herd. The thunder of their departure was still faintly audible when Ilrai soared over the bluff and descended, having maintained his course even after the vertical beam of Rodney's light had been extinguished. He set off a series of photoflashes to guide the others who were converging on the spot. Very shortly the shore of the cove became a confusion of light and sound as Sancabriel and the party from the causeway flapped down from the sky, to be followed by the hissing miniature tanks of the Kenians which rumbled up along the river-bank. Mattawomba, being without harness, had remained behind.

"Rodney's light, smashed to bits!" groaned Himberling. "And look at this tripod, twisted into corkscrews! Dinopod tracks all over the place! They must have been ambushed from those trees."

"There is no sign of bloodshed," thought Ilrai. "It is my opinion that they were carried off alive."

"If Rodney's alive, why don't we hear from her?" thought back Himberling. "And where is Sarrasen's rifle?"

"Rodney may not be conscious," insisted Ilrai. "I feel that she is alive. The rifle may be nearby, where it fell in the water."

A thudding crack sounded remotely. The manipulations of the Dinopods had accidentally fired the gun.

"That was a shot!" exclaimed Sancabriel. "There's your answer! Sarrasen is alive anyway, and that was his way of letting us know!"

In the short silence which followed, the slapping of ripples along the muddy shore seemed unnaturally loud.

"Ilrai, you've been training Mattawomba and probably can get through to him better than any of us," Sancabriel rapped out. "Have him instruct his engineer to run back along the causeway at top speed and whistle up all the patrols within hearing. We'll throw a cordon around the whole forest. Have the Wall-Makers call in all the patrols they can spare and that can get here within an hour, and get out all the reserves in the three nearest sectors of Chicagua. Tell Mattawomba to stand by in Chicagua as our liaison man with the Wall-Makers. I'll contact the *Hermes*. She'll have to go to the other end of the lake to take off; she'd make a shambles of the terminal yards with her negative field if she took off from where she is now. I can get someone else to handle Mattawomba's juggernaut. Himberling, you try to make contact with the launch on Island Number Seven; tell 'em to come in at once and report at the end of the causeway. They're not much farther away from here than the *Hermes*. We'll give these Dinopods a memorable night—something they can tell their great-grandchildren about."

Mattawomba, reclining in his gondola, was suddenly galvanized. He scribbled furiously on his writing tablet, showed it to his Kenian train-crew, who scurried to their posts. The train rolled backward, gathered speed, fled down the causeway in reverse, its whistle screaming a coded alarm. Across the dreaming blue of the Outlands, there rose an answering medley of remote hootings as the roving tank-patrols, alert for vandal Dinopods, acknowledged Sancabriel's order. Elevated gateways clanged open in the living walls, let down their bascules to the sound of chain and ratchet, disgorged reinforcements. Far away, a third of the way around Chicagua and across the strait on Island Number Seven, there was a running and a shouting in the encampments about the *Hermes* and the launch.

CHAPTER XII

RODNEY'S head lay on Sarrasen's chest as he swam backward, clutching her with one arm. Her body trailed flaccidly in the water, her eyes were closed, her face was still and blue-white under the moon. Was he swimming parallel to the current, across it, or in spirals? He could see nothing but blue water, blue mist, the alien sky. The moon was almost at the zenith; no chance of getting his bearings there. These unfamiliar Kenian constellations! Just how was he looking at them?

Something loomed darkly through the mist. The shore? No, a little island. He drove himself grimly toward it. There were no shallows near it; it rose abruptly from the water. He crawled upon it, dragged

Rodney after him, commenced the measured routine of artificial respiration.

The island was soft and springy underfoot, overgrown with bulbous-leaved creepers which trailed in the river. He glanced up from his rhythmic concentration and was surprised to see three more islands some distance to port. Three islands? They must be the same three he had used as a landmark. Had he drifted so far? He resumed his ministrations to Rodney, glanced again, and blinked. The three islands had shifted upstream!

Comprehension dawned. It was his island that was moving — a buoyant mass torn loose by the diurnal flood from upstream marshlands. There was Iron Mountain forward, rising above the river mist. That would be south, and this would be the nearest approach of the river to the causeway before it swerved westward around the mountain. His sense of direction returned; the contellation became recognizable.

"By now, all hands will have turned out to find us," he reflected. "There'll be no one at the rail-head except the Wall-Makers with the trains, and perhaps Mattawomba."

With all the power of his lungs he shouted repeatedly, "Mattawomba!" and the mountain threw back his cry, a plaintive bleat.

While he continued to labor over Rodney, fighting the inertia of protesting muscles, his navigator's instinct automatically observed the changing relation of stars and mountains as the river swept westward and back again. Perhaps two hours elapsed, while he stuck doggedly to his task, remembering the age-old maxim which governs such emergencies: *"Don't give up!"*

The river-water evaporated from his clothes in wisps of vapor, and he drenched them again with perspiration which was not altogether the perspiration of ultimate fatigue. The salty fluid stung his eyes, streaked his face with the bog-mud still matted in his hair.

Rodney's eyelids quivered; she sneezed and opened her eyes. Sarrasen collapsed on the mossy turf. One of the creepers had wound a tendril about his ankle but he did not notice it. From the waist down he seemed to have petrified; from the waist up every muscle was a creaking agony.

"Come out of it, Rodney," he wheezed. "I think you'll have to work on me now."

The floating island passed into the blue obscurity of a deep gorge where the river seethed noisily between echoing water-sculptured walls. The high crags along the brink of the chasm reflected a sapphire glow of moonlight into the depths. Foaming cross-currents buffeted the raft of vegetation, sent it rocking and revolving against stony snags which tore off fragments and launched them upon swirling independent careers. A sudden bend in the stream flung the crumbling mass within arm's-length of the canyon wall, stranded it on a pebbly shoal.

Sarrasen and Rodney stood with their backs against a vertical wall of slippery rock while the shallow torrent tugged at their ankles. They watched their raft vanish piecemeal into the dark threat of the canyon, down a staircase of tumbling cataracts.

"One hundred feet if it's an inch!" shouted Sarrasen above the tumult of the waters, gesturing upward. "If we were snails we'd have a chance of crawling to the top. I believe that we've come clear around Iron Mountain. We should be somewhere south of the rail-head."

"I'm still groggy," responded Rodney. "Where are we? What happened to Ilrai?"

THE SKY northward from the causeway was blood-red with flame and turbulent with boiling red-lit smoke. The *Hermes* swooped low above the holocaust and the trails of rocket-bullets radiated from her in a fabric of intersecting crimson lines. Sancabriel was making good his promise that this night would be memorable in the folklore of Dinopods.

Himberling and three others of the *Hermes'* party—including two of Rodney's feminine colleagues—stood upon a smoldering hill leaning wearily on their rocket-rifles, wings dropping cape-fashion. They looked down upon the smoking vestiges of what had been a grove of sponge-trees.

"In a world which rains every day like this one does, one wouldn't expect to find things so easily inflammable," Himberling remarked gloomily. "Who would have thought that a burning Dinopod would start a forest fire! Where's Ilrai?"

"Ilrai returned to the causeway," replied one of the girls. "He has a curious idea that Rodney is alive, possibly Counselor Sarrasen also, and that we're looking for them in the wrong place. He can't explain why he has such a suspicion."

The silhouettes of a squadron of Kenian tanks appeared against the flaming sky on

a neighboring ridge, then dropped from view. A flapping black shape rose against the glare, swooped down upon the hilltop. It was Sancabriel, a tigering gleam in his eye and Sarrasen's Humboldt rifle in his hand.

"Look at this!" he snarled. "We know how fast these Dinopods can travel and how they could have taken Sarrasen and Rodney. We found the herd that did the deed. They had this rifle with them! Nothing else! Do you know what the beasts have done?"

He shook his fists aloft, clutching the rifle.

"THEY'VE EATEN THEM!"

AT A LATER date Ilrai wrote in his journal as follows:

"Human nature being as it is, it was perhaps inevitable that a third of the Dinopod population of Island Number Seven should be massacred in one night. In all fairness I must say that Martian nature, under an equal provocation, very likely would have reacted in the same way. Nevertheless it was a tragedy. It is true that the Dinopods are Kenian carnivores—or rather, omnivores —but a study of their habits has revealed, not only that the flesh of terrestrial creatures is repugnant to them but that when they are induced to consume it by artifice they become violently ill and may even die from its effects. Such incidents remind us that we are essentially but half civilized."

* * * * * *

ILRAI PACED nervously back and forth along the edge of the circular platform at the end of the causeway. He was oppressed by a feeling that the glowering red flare in the northern sky was the symbol of a gastly error. Some deep resonance of mind with mind, even with an unconscious mind, told him that Rodney was alive —and not up there under the smoke of the burning forest. He could no longer contact the minds of the Dinopod slayers; they were altogether absorbed in a fury of revenge. Ilrai's mental sendings were no more heeded than the chirpings of a canary in a riot. The emanations from the onslaught were red, Ilrai brooded, like the red in the sky.

The Martian became rigid. A voice sounded in his brain, the voice of Rodney's thought!

"Ilrai!" came the call. "Ilrai! Am I coming through?"

"Yes," responded Ilrai. "In the names of Phobos and Deimos, where are you?"

"I'm with Counselor Sarrasen."

"I *knew* it!" The friends of the imperturbable Martian would have been amazed to see him execute several steps of that time-honored terrestrial foot-rhythm known as the hornpipe. "But what is your location?"

"The Counselor says we're south of the causeway. We're in a canyon and we can't get out. It should be easily seen from the air. Is anyone with you? I've tried to contact Himberling and some others without success. Their thoughts are terrible. I can't make them out. It's like trying to talk to a hurricane."

"I am alone on the causeway and I can contact no one. But wait! I have forgotten Mattawomba! He remained in Chicagua. I must devise a plan of action."

Along the rim of the platform were various little shelters where the Wall-Makers stored tools and supplies. After further mental interchange Ilrai extracted from one of these shelters a coil of rope spun from Kenian silk. The gondola containing his photographic equipment stood on a siding; from this he removed the photoflash apparatus. A touch on his belt-studs reduced his apparent weight to eight ounces, and a soaring leap sped him southward.

CHAPTER XIII

"EVERY joint in my skeleton is like a rusty hinge, and growing worse," grimaced Sarrasen, unsuccessfully trying to sit on a ledge three inches wide while he supported Rodney with one arm. She was not yet quite steady on her feet. "What does Ilrai report?"

"He sees the canyon, Counselor," replied Rodney. "Your estimated bearings are fair enough; we're about two miles south of the rail-head."

"Counselor!" repeated Sarrasen with a frown of annoyance. "I have an individual name of my own, in case you're not aware of it yet."

"Of course your feet are wet. So are mine. We're standing in water."

"I was trying to remind you that my name is Jefferey," said Sarrasen, raising his voice.

"I can't hear you. The river makes so much noise."

"I'm suggesting that you call me Jefferey, blast it!" shouted Sarrasen, and filled the gorge with new reverberations.

"I couldn't do that; it wouldn't be good for the morale of the organization," Rodney admonished gravely. "There's Ilrai's first flash! He's over the canyon."

"Tell him that he's about one thousand feet to starboard," Sarrasen moodily directed.

Two more flashes, followed by telepathic responses from Rodney, brought Ilrai to a point directly above the stranded pair. He secured one end of his rope around a pinnacle of stone, swung on the rope with his full weight, then allowed the coil to unroll downwards. The overhang of the cliff caused the free end to splash into the middle of the torrent, which promptly swept it downstream. Ilrai reduced weight, let the rope run through one hand while he floated down, sighted the pair at the base of the cliff, flapped toward them with the end of the rope, handed it to Sarrasen.

"I shall now go aloft," Ilrai thought to Rodney. "There I shall remove my harness —since it lacks sufficient marginal lift to support both of us—fasten one of its loops around the rope, and let it slide down. It will fit you very loosely but it will serve to carry you up. Then we shall repeat the operation and bring up the Counselor. I have contacted Mattawomba, who is on his way now, by rail, with additional harness. He is a novice at harness flying but he should be able to bring the paraphernalia from the causeway over this short distance. My flashes will guide him."

Rodney's removal from the canyon was effected without mishap. She threw one leg outside the oversize belt and ascended as in a breeches buoy. But when Rodney sent the harness down the rope to Sarrasen, Ilrai's rescue plan suffered a miscarriage.

The descent of the harness caused its wings to balloon with air and billow outward. One wing caught on a projection of the cliff. Since the line ran loosely through the harness, and since Sarrasen's movements were limited by the small extent of the shallow in which he was standing, no amount of tugging and shaking would dislodge it.

"I'll bend the line around me!" bellowed the Counselor. "You'll have to haul me up!"

When he had completed his preparations and shouted his readiness, Sarrasen waited expectantly but the line continued to hang slack.

Two pebbles cracked against the opposite cliff in quick succession and rebounded into the river. One plopped into the shallow at the Counselor's feet.

"Watch the loose rock up there!" he shouted.

Came a tremendous heave on the line which left him spinning in mid-air, a yard above the stream. Equally tremendous heaves jerked him upward ten feet at a time.

Sarrasen marvelled at Ilrai's strength.

When he approached the point where the line slid over the bulge of the cliff he thrust out his feet and came up running, with Ilrai's harness over his arm. He was confronted—not by Ilrai—but by a Dinopod, hauling in the rope as if it were a fish-line. Ilrai's flashes had served as beacons to eyes other than those for which they were intended.

The Dinopod was not alone. A battalion of its fellows stood in irregular ranks upon the rocky terraces behind it. They were abnormally quiet, as if they waited in an expectant hush. Occasionally they stamped, snorted softly, shook their armored heads. Blue gleams shifted up and down their colossal horns, slithered over the knobs and corrugations of their jointed back-plates.

Rodney was seated on the ground at the feet of her captor, tenderly feeling her head. There were dark stains on her fingers.

"They sneaked up on us and threw stones," she informed Sarrasen bitterly. "Can't they do anything but go around throwing at people? I saw them in time to duck. It was only a glancing blow. And I volunteered as a decoy! Ilrai's out cold. Maybe he's dead. I don't know."

Jefferey's eyes followed her pointing finger, beheld Ilrai sprawling limply. A hot surge of anger rose within him; then he was dumbfounded by the picture which flashed across his memory. He saw a man —could it be Counselor Sarrasen?—sighting along a gun-barrel at a hated image in the range-finder, his finger taut upon the trigger.

"There's nothing we can do now," continued Rodney. "It's their move."

THE three were surrounded by a company of Dinopods who held a consultation over them in subdued, hollow, guttural noises. Ilrai's harness was snatched from Sarrasen's hands, Rodney was raised roughly to her feet. The conferees bent down their heads and sniffed cautiously at their captives through olfactory tubes at the

bases of their horns, then stamped and tossed their heads in evident distaste.

"The big oafs!" muttered Rodney. "They're no rosebuds! I wish I could tell them. They smell like vinegar and turpentine."

The upshot of the conference was that Rodney and Sarrasen were firmly bound with many coils of the line which Ilrai had provided, after it had been severed into two portions by one snap of a Dinopod's jaws. They were curious, intricate jaws with a multiplicity of serrated mandibles and quivering palps like the mouth of an insect. The inert Martian was left unbound.

"These knots! Did you ever see anything like them?" exclaimed Sarrasen, making a mental note even in the midst of his distress concerning Ilrai.

Three Dinopods took charge of the captives, carrying them gingerly at arm's length as if they were an unpleasant sort of vermin. Why they should have taken Ilrai remains something of a mystery, although it has been established that the Dinopod mind entertains a superstitious regard for the unburied dead of their own kind or of other worldly races.

The entire company set off across the Outlands at a rapid trot in the direction of the causeway, then broke into an undulating gallop. The plain boomed and rang under their battering wooden hoofs until it seemed that the very sky must be shaking and thundering. Jefferey, swinging through dizzy arcs in the fist of the galloping Dinopod, caught glimpses of a flame-reddened sky, saw the flashes of the *Hermes'* guns below the horizon, heard their detonations like great doors slamming in the heavens above the rumbling thunder of the Dinopodian charge.

The charge slackened as it drew near to Iron Mountain, halted at the rail-head where the causeway sloped down to the germinating wall.

"What goes on here?" Rodney called weakly to Sarrasen. "A buried treasure hunt?"

A gang of Dinopods were laboring frenziedly at an excavating project. Some were plowing up the gravelly soil with their horns; others were scooping up the loose material—with what appeared to be Dinopod back-plates—and heaping it upon the immature barrier. The defensive polyps were entirely buried along a fifty-foot section, and up the incline which gave access to the rail-head platform. The workers who had deposited the final shovelfuls at the head of this ramp threw down their scoops and mounted the platform, sent the whooping echoes flying among the precipices of Iron Mountain with their triumphant abysmal bellowings.

"It's an invasion!" cried Rodney. "And not a patrol in sight!"

"The patrols seldom come out this far," Sarrasen responded as their Dinopods grunted up the newly created ramp. "No regular trains to protect. From the looks of the sky up north, all available forces are there."

A brusque shaking admonished them to refrain from further conversation.

Advancing along the causeway three abreast, the Dinopod column was headed by the trio bearing Rodney, Jefferey and Ilrai. The Martian remained lax and unresisting, like a grotesque rag doll in his captor's grasp. It is impossible to say what motive lay behind the Dinopods' foray. The railway ramps inside the circumferential wall offered easy access to Chicagua, but the existence of these ramps must have been unknown to the invaders—or at best a shrewd surmise. Whatever havoc they may have planned to wreak upon the Wall-Makers, they must have known that they risked certain ultimate destruction at the hands of the Earthlings. Perhaps they had no thought save of desperate suicidal retaliation for what was to them unprovoked wholesale slaughter. Some genius among Dinopods may have schemed their attack under the stress of revengeful passion.

The four parallel tracks stretched to the horizon ahead of the advancing column. Southward the Outlands were blue with moonshine; northward they were sullen red under the fiery sky. The Dinopods were blue on one side, red on the other.

Jefferey noted dully that a brilliant star had risen above the horizon, continued to hang there as if resting on the rim of the world. A dim sense of astronomical irregularity stirred within him; he scanned the heavens. This star did not fit into his knowledge of the constellations as seen from Kenia. How odd that it should have appeared at the very vortex of the converging tracks. He regarded it with heightening interest, became alert. It was below the horizon now! Little quivers of light ran down the rails before it. It was not a star!

CHAPTER XIV

THE Kenian locomotive-builders had been quick to perceive the superiority of the electric arc over their previous oil-burning headlights. It was one of these later models which was now bearing down upon the Dinopods. It was in fact Mattawomba's personal car, used for inspection tours, with a specially constructed tender which permitted him to squat behind the cab and manipulate the controls. He flashed his intentions to Rodney. The hypnotic attraction of the dazzling light, he hoped, would induce the Dinopods to forget their captives and provide opportunity of rescue.

"Suppose they throw us down and walk on us!" shuddered Rodney.

But the Dinopod reactions were not precisely as Mattawomba expected. The cannier advance guard bowed or averted their ranks, goggling in fascination and elbowing each other. Sarrasen's custodian galloped in advance of the others and held its prisoner suspended above the fringe of glittering blades which bordered the causeway, indicating by pantomime that if the locomotive continued to advance the Earthling would be allowed to fall among the razor-edges.

Mattawomba was thrown into confusion by this unforeseen strategem and hastily applied his brakes. But the Dinopods' naive mechanical ideas included no concept of momentum; if the locomotive were going to stop, they reasoned, it would stop dead, immediately. Moreover, the threatened sacrifice of Jefferey was pure bluff; they had no intention of losing their hostages if it could be avoided. Therefore, when the locomotive continued to pound down upon them, all three of the leading Dinopods cantered toward it, tossed their captives upon the track before it, and retreated a short distance. Their sole desire was to halt the onrushing menace and overturn it.

Sarrasen's shin cracked against one of the rails and an explosion of pain flared through him to his finger-tips. Rodney fell on top of him.

But Ilrai landed on his feet. Ilrai, who had feigned death in the clutch of the Dinopod while his winged thoughts sped across the miles to Mattawomba's brain, revising his plan of rescue to meet the changed situation.

With one four-handed sweep he gathered up the two Earthlings, and stepped aside as Mattawomba's locomotive rolled past and creaked to a halt with a singing sizzle of steam.

The Dinopods stood immobilized by this miracle of the re-animated corpse.

"Two gondolas behind," Mattawomba directed briefly. "Put them on and cut the ropes."

And it was done.

Not until the rescue train had attained half-speed in reverse did the Dinopods awake to action. Then they charged after it, while the causeway trembled. For a few moments it seemed they would overtake it but their pace was no match for the mounting speed of piston-driven wheels and soon they were invisibly distant.

"My leg!" Jefferey groaned from the floor of the gondola.

"Your leg! How about my head?" retorted Rodney.

"A sledge-hammer wouldn't make a dent in it," responded Jefferey through his teeth.

Mattawomba looked over his shoulder.

"We're not through yet," he shouted above the iron roar and clicking tattoo of wheel on rail. "We still have to stop the Dinopods."

He jerked a thumb backwards.

Jefferey raised himself painfully on one elbow and looked over the rear of the gondola.

Mattawomba's train was hammering along Track One. The headlights of three more locomotives were approaching via the remaining tracks. Mattawomba reduced speed, halted with a jerk, started forward with groaning drivers, was overtaken and passed by the hissing onrush of the three other trains, caught up with them again. Now the four locomotives raced together in perfect alignment; four pairs of compound cylinders beating in unison harmonized in locomotive orchestration. Kenian engineers leaned from the cab-windows of the other three. Each tender was followed by a flat carrying a heap of oil-soaked rubbish and a string of tank-cars.

"Twenty tanks in each train," called Mattawomba, "and all the domes are open!"

AT A BLAST from Mattawomba's whistle the other locomotives fell back, arranged themselves *en echelon* with Mattawomba in the lead. The second gondola of his train was adjacent to the flat-car on the next track; each flat-car was opposite the engine-cab of the next train.

The long-legged Ilrai now strode from train to train across the diagonal path of flat-cars, ignited the heap of rubbish on the outermost one, stepped back to the third, lifted the Kenian engineer—who coiled worm-like about his arm—from the cab of the fourth locomotive, reached through the cab-window and opened the throttle wide. The fourth train shot ahead, running wild and trailing a banner of flame.

He had repeated this operation on the other two trains and transferred the three Kenian engineers to the forward gondola when the air was shaken by the thudding jar of an explosion to the rear. All eyes looked back to behold a tank car belching pompons of flame, ignited by flying sparks falling into the open dome, and rapidly overtaking them.

"We'll be cooked alive if it passes us," called Mattawomba. "This is the one thing I was afraid of. We can outrun it. This is a light haul."

"Outrun it!" shouted Rodney. "We don't have much of a margin! I think I can see the Dinopods ahead of us!"

"We'll have to chance it," was the reply as the gondolas lurched forward with a crash of couplings. Another tank of oil let go with a boom, showered blazing puddles across the causeway.

Interminable moments passed while they raced the uncontrolled train in a damp reek of hot iron and oil-laden steam. They drew ahead of it, while the rear of their transit was punctuated by the detonations of exploding oil.

"Ilrai, listen to me. I have something to say," began Jefferey, breaking a long silence. The Martian, crouching over him, half rose with a movement which expressed surprise, then inclined his eye-encircled head as if to indicate, "I am listening." It seemed that he had said aloud, "I am listening."

"Tonight, when I set out with Rodney, I almost shot you for a Dinopod," Jefferey continued. "In fact, I almost shot you anyway, even after I recognized you."

The Martian rose to his full height, swayed with the swaying gondola, looked down at Jefferey with eyes that glowed like phosphorus. It was impossible—Ilrai could not speak—but Jefferey thought that he had said, "You have changed, Counselor Sarrasen."

"I didn't say anything," replied Rodney to Jefferey's question.

"We're stopping here! We're half a mile ahead!" barked Mattawomba. "Jump as soon as you dare and run across the tracks!"

"Jefferey can't jump!" shrieked Rodney—unheard by that individual because he had fainted when Ilrai hastily lifted him from the floor of the gondola.

Earthlings and Martian lay flat on the farther side of the causeway as the blazing oil-train swept past them, leaking streams of fire; then ran breathlessly in the opposite direction. Ilrai still carried Sarrasen. Behind them as they ran, glancing backward, three successive shocks rocked the causeway as the wheeled projectiles plowed into the Dinopod column, piled up with screeching metallic din in buckling junk-heaps of steel which toppled from the wall in volcanic ruin. Crimson mushrooms of flame vomited skyward, tossing up ragged shreds of metal and meteor-tailed fragments of the would-be invaders. Fiery cataracts poured from both sides of the causeway.

The rearward portion of the column fled in trampling panic, jostling each other from the wall to lie helpless on the Outlands plain.

And when the flames on the causeway had died down among the twisted wreckage, and only a dark smear of faintly-reddened smoke obscured the stars in the northern sky, the gaunt un-Earthly forms of the Outlands scavengers came stalking under the blue moon to the aftermath of carnage.

CHAPTER XV

A PROTESTING feminine voice echoed along the hall of the *Hermes'* sick-bay.

"But I'm not suffering from shock!" expostulated Rodney. "All I have is a bump on the head. And it was a dirty trick, taking off half of my hair!"

"You'll stay in bed until I tell you differently," admonished Himberling. "We'll grow the hair back fast enough when that scalp-wound is healed."

"How about Jefferey?" demanded Rodney, abandoning protest as futile.

"Nothing serious there. A simple fracture of the left tibia, various lacerations and bruises, general muscular stiffness. But I'm afraid he's a little delirious. He insisted that we bring him a bit of cord, and now he's tying and untying knots and muttering, 'If a Dinopod can do it, so can I'."

"That isn't delirium; it's merely persist-

ence. You'll hear about it in due time. Any other casualties. Where's Ilrai?"

"Ilrai is in his cabin, filling another volume of his journal. He came through unscathed. No, he wasn't hit in the head. You can't sneak up on a Martian with panoramic vision. He flopped almost as soon as the stone left the Dinopod's hand. Jefferey's sudden metamorphosis into a budding telepath has excited Ilrai tremendously; he'd work with Jefferey twelve hours a day if we'd let him. He's still theorizing about it; thinks that Jefferey failed the first time because he was afraid of failure, but doesn't quite understand the emotional mechanism of the change as yet. But he will—and then watch out for a fifty-thousand-word thesis.

"There are some other casualties. Your pal Wanda was burned on the arm by a falling sponge tree. Archer was gored in the shoulder by a Dinopod. Campione was seared across his shoulders by a rocket-bullet. Three cases of partial suffocation by smoke. That's all. We haven't had so many people in the sick-bay since we landed."

AS soon as Himberling permitted, his patients were requested by Captain Jutland, aboard the *Caduceus,* to make personal reports by radio. The signals were relayed through a remote-controlled robot transport poised outside the ionosphere of Kenia. The proceedings were in fact a conference. The participants on Kenia could see and hear Captain Jutland via installations at their bed-sides or in their cabins, and could hear each other. Captain Jutland could see and hear all of them at once in his conference room on the *Caduceus*—a round chamber completely encircled by a frieze of contiguous telescreens. Ilrai, a master telepath whose range exceeded that of all but a handful of exceptional Earthlings—none of whom were connected with the Sanitary Service — utilized direct thought-transference.

After hearing varied descriptions of the Dinopod hunt which turned into a miniature war, Captain Jutland remarked:

"In other words, Jefferey went out to bring in a Dinopod, whereas they brought him in. How does it feel to be a victim of the chase, Counselor?"

"It feels like a broken leg," responded Jefferey. "I'll watch out for bogs next time."

"Next time you'll go over to Seven," observed Sancabriel. "According to latest reports, all the surviving Dinopods lit out and swam the strait."

"You may feel that Kenia is a difficult assignment," Captain Jutland went on. "It isn't. You haven't seen a really difficult world yet—with, say, two or more mechanized races, all hostile to you and to each other, and an assortment of nasty parasites and infections which thrive on human meat."

"I'm not sure that I want to see any other worlds," declared Jefferey.

"What's that?"

"When we've finished, some of us will stay behind to make preparations for the first immigrants. That's the usual procedure, I understand, if the world is finally certified."

"That will be some time in the future, my boy. Among other things, we'll have to be sure that Mattawomba is absolutely, one hundred per cent cured and that his infection isn't latent in some form of Kenian life."

"I have decided to remain on Kenia also," interjected Mattawomba. "I can't bring myself to abandon my railroad. It's the biggest model I ever had."

"Model-builder rejects Eden in favor of locomotives," commented Captain Jutland. Then, to Jefferey, "Now tell me why you want to stay with the Permanent Base party."

"This world grows on one. You'd have to be here to understand. You'd have to see the days of rain and thunder, when things grow while you watch them and the sun breaks through like a cloudburst of light. You'd have to see the blue nights. It's like having two worlds in one. Even the Dinopods . . . . there's an aura of power about them. However, there's a condition."

He hesitated.

"I'll stay if Rodney stays with me."

"What does Rodney say?" inquired Captain Jutland.

"I haven't said," announced Rodney succinctly.

In his bed aboard the *Hermes,* Jefferey was aware of a faint infiltration of Ilrai's thought into his brain. He was still the veriest novice as a telepath, and the Martian's thoughts came through with a quality of incompleteness and indefiniteness, as if words were left out. As nearly as it can be represented in print, the general effect was something like this:

(Continued On Page 46)

Martin Pearson
PRESENTS

AJAX of AJAX

Adjusting my cape at the requisite jaunty angle expected of the Emperor of Midplanet, I invited my fellow victims of the accident into the station for a snack or drink.

Calkins, Man of Destiny, met a man of mystery who recognized his genius, his more than human vision and his unquestioned fitness to rule over the new world. Thus was our hero proclaimed.

AJAX OF AJAX

"EXCUSE IT, please," said the spider seated just in front of me, "but I fear the inner wheel is going to get stuck in a moment."

Instinctively I grabbed at the arms of my seat but it was already too late. Swiftly the entire riding chamber turned upside down and then started to revolve faster and faster with the three passengers inside. I have always been suspicious of Martian monowheel cars and my wiser instincts were, as usual, justified. The great exterior wheel had jammed against the balancing mechanism and the interior car which swung free from the hub was no longer gyroscopically stable but one with the other wheel.

And so down the Main Viaduct into Syrtis Major City there came rolling a huge single wheel, going faster and faster, completely out of control.

Within it, I was lost in a jumble of long, hairy spider legs, an utterly impossible waving green beard and, of course, my gold-embroidered purple cloak, my commander's sword and my plumed helmet. Over and over we went, my sword banging against my legs and eliciting groans and yelps from the Martian and the little man with the odd-colored beard. I kept dodging as one or another of the eight long arachnid legs swished in my direction and over and over we all went until suddenly there came a thunderous jolt, we all seemed to be flung high in the air and then came down with a crash.

When I recovered myself I found myself staring into the two big round brown eyes of the Martian. Set in his comical face atop the little spherical body, they now wore a somewhat tragic expression.

"It was in the Cube," he said fatalistically. "I am now without a job."

I knew the Martian code. He had been the driver, the vehicle had gone astray, he would be discharged. According to Martian custom, the question of whether an accident was avoidable or unavoidable did not enter. They believed firmly in the laws of luck-streams and jinx-individuals.

As we untangled ourselves and stepped out the door in the craft, I found that, outside of a few bruises where my sword and accouterments had come against me, I was in good condition. Adjusting my cape at the requisite jaunty angle expected of Ajax Calkins, Emperor of Midplanet, I magnanimously invited my two fellow victims of the accident into a Fueling Station to have a drink or snack.

The Martian got up on his eight long legs until his little body and broad flat face came up to my shoulder and then agreed. The other, the little man with the impossible green beard, bowed slightly.

"I am honored, your majesty," he said.

I glowed within. He had recognized me, no doubt had read of my heroic exploits in the planet papers and knew the honor he had just been granted. Then, beside, he probably recognized me by my uniform, the scarlet and green jerkin and breeches, as well as my flaring cape and the golden helmet as befits a Prince-Regent of Myeland.

I SWAGGERED into the Station, ignoring the staring crowd of assorted Martians—arachnids, neo-termites, and lobsteroids—made my way between the mechano fuelers to the plasmo fuelers.

We sat down at the little table, the green-beard and I, and the Martian who introduced himself as The Third Least Wuj.

I forebore to ask the little man his name until after we had put our orders down the

vent in the table-top. Then I gazed at him in my regal way and he volunteered the information.

"I am known as Anton Smallways, your brightness," he said with the proper tone of respect, "and I count myself triply fortunate in having made the honor of your acquaintance so soon, even if in such an odd manner. I had come to Syrtis Major to see you."

He fingered his long vividly green beard and smiled oddly. I was curious to know why he wore his beard that color but it would have been beneath my dignity to ask. Can Ajax Calkins stoop to such vulgar notice of just an ordinary mortal? I knew that we great men were handicapped sometimes thusly, but that is one of the crosses we must bear. And I can bear it as is my fit.

I raised my eyebrows to indicate interest in the statement he had made and, as the food came popping up out of the table slots before us, he went on.

"I am aware that your excellency is, shall we say, at leisure these days. I had come to lay at your feet a humble request from the poor group I represent, a request possibly beneath your noble notice but it is the best we can offer."

I thrilled at his words. At last, recognition of my true status. The man was marvellous, I noticed, but I carefully refrained from showing it. The Wuj was also impressed for I saw his eyes fixed at me with wonder. For the Third Least of his clan, he was truly honored. I expanded within and signaled Anton Smallways to continue.

"WE ARE A group of poor and humble asteroid miners and crystal farmers who feel the undue burden of unjust taxation to the tyrants of the Interplanetary Union to press most heavily. We inhabit a small cluster of tiny planets, all possibly beneath your notice, but we have found that our planets are actually not within the legal limits of the Asteroid Bureau and indeed are not in any proper bureau of the Union. In truth our worlds are and should be independent. But we dare not make that fact known for the Union would take advantage of the fact that we are humble and unknown folk to refuse us our true and proper status. Now your magnificence is well known to all the planets. Were you to ascend our throne and from there proclaim the fact to the universe, the worlds would have to recognize us and leave us to pursue our humble ways in peace.

"For this boon," he went on, "we would be eternally grateful and would maintain you as our King forever."

I sat up more stiffly in my seat and drew my cloak around me. Wuj was properly awed too. On Mars, the United Beings have had an equilateral democracy for so many hundreds of thousands of years that no idea of kings or nobles exist at all. But after all what can you expect of non-humans? Only an Ajax Calkins can be truly noble, and Ajax Calkins is a man.

"Where are your planetoids?" I asked.

The man reached under his green beard and drew out a chart. Laying this down flat on the table, he pointed with his finger to the line of Jupiter's orbit.

"The Asteroid Bureau has direction over all planets between the orbits of Jupiter and Mars. The Jovian Bureau has control only over Jupiter and all attendant moons and comets. But our worlds are also located directly in the orbit of Jupiter and are not in any way moons."

"How can that be?" I asked. "Surely they cannot be in Jupiter's orbit and not be overrun and captured by the huge planet?"

Greenbeard smiled. "But they are, your wonder, they are in Jupiter's orbit. I refer to the Fore-Trojan Asteroids."

His finger pointed to a spot on the Jovian orbit about sixty degrees of arc in front of the path of the Giant World.

"The Trojan Asteroids revolve about the sun in a fixed three-body relationship with Jupiter. They are always sixty degrees ahead of the planet. They move as fast as Jupiter and in his orbit. As you will see, this places them outside either the Asteroid Bureau or the Jovian Bureau. The names of our six little planets are Achilles, Hector, Nestor, Agamemnon, Odysseus, and Ajax."

No sooner had I heard the name of the last than I knew that fate had again called me. It was a good omen. I, Ajax, should take charge of the destinies of the planet Ajax and its five attendant worlds.

I drew myself up and gave my subject Anton Smallways my consent. In my royal pleasure, I offered the Third Least Wuj a post as my aide-de-camp and he accepted.

Anton Smallways smiled very pleased. "There is," he started to say, "the small matter of funds to build up our humble worlds to suit the eminence of your coming."

I cut him short. "I shall place part of

my fortune at your disposal to make whatever renovations are necessary."

The little man with the beard bowed low.

"We are honored, your marvelship," he said but he was smiling in a most disturbing way. I thrust the evil thought aside. It must have been the color of his beard that threw me off at that moment.

THE Third Least Wuj hung from the ceiling of the control room aboard my flagship Destiny II. Suction cups in his feet, a hangover from spider days in primeval Martian jungles, gave him that curious ability but it made me nervous just the same. I had chosen to take the Wuj with me while Smallways followed behind in the three freighters we had chartered and loaded with goods.

I stood at the front port of his ship, my hand resting lightly on the pommel of my sword, rehearsing mentally the speech I would make from my throne room on Ajax. I had already planned to turn that world over entirely to myself for my capital. Wuj, looking out in reverse over my head, squeaked and then said:—

"I don't trust Anton Smallways. He doesn't seem to square by the Cube."

The Cube was the famous Martian box of traditional microscripts that reposes in each Martian domicile. From it, it is said, there can be reconstructed all of Martian history and knowledge. Yet the cubes are only six inches along each dimension.

"Anton is a loyal subject of mine; why should you distrust him?" I replied in my best throne-room manner.

"His green beard upsets me," said the Wuj. "I am not ignorant of the ways of you earth-people; I had been told that you had hair of brown and black and red and yellow and grey and white but I have never heard of green hair."

I frowned. "He is probably eccentric; surely we should not question him on such grounds." What I thought was that it was not always wise to look a gift rocket in the tubes.

Outside, the orbit of Jupiter was drawing near. We had negotiated the path through the asteroids safely for I am a superior navigator as befits my rank. A new brand of space-sickness cure also helped. Now there came into sight a small cluster of lights.

The Fore-Trojans! My kingdom! And some day I would extend them to the Aft-Trojans, the group that followed Jupiter instead of preceding it. But it was fitting that my kingdom should lead the way for the largest planet in the heavens.

There were six tiny lights hanging in sight. By concentrating, one could make out their movements in relation to each other. It was fascinating.

All six of these planets revolve about a common center—the point on the Jovian orbit sixty degrees away. No single asteroid remained in this point, all passed through it at least once in each swing. For they swung back and forth about that point. Out about a few hundred miles, then back again and passing through the exact point swing out again in the other direction. Six planets passed through the point one after the other in complicated and varying patterns.

It was a marvelous and fascinating picture. Wonderful is the universe and wonderful is the kingdom of Ajax.

Anton's freighter swung up alongside of us and took the lead. My ship followed it in maneuvering for a landing on Hector, the largest of the six worldlets.

HECTOR was about thirty miles in diameter and as I circled for a landing I could see that there were a number of domed structures on its rocky surface. I didn't notice any signs of excavations or mining but that would follow I supposed. We landed before the largest of the domed buildings.

As I left the airlock a spitball whizzed past my ear. I kept my balance as befits a king. Smallways glared around with a fierce scowl at the men. There were about thirty or forty of them—rough-clad, tough and battered characters. They stood around now looking either amused or gaping with interest or even some with true awe and proper respect.

I realized that I would have to keep in mind that mine was a pioneering kingdom, a sort of camp of Genghis Khan and that we must allow for their crudities. I smiled at them but few, if any, were the answering smiles and I did not entirely care for those.

The dome was evidently a combined dormitory, store-room. I saw boxes piled high all over the place and other piles of material stacked up in the distant parts of the chamber. I didn't think that miners boxed their products but after all, I had never been a miner.

Smallways called the men to attention

and then gave a brief speech in which he introduced me as their king. I nodded in acquiescence as the man with the green beard led the applause.

Smallways then took me to a small chamber where there were maps of the planetoids and we discussed the creation of my palace.

Ajax was oddly enough the smallest planetoid, being about ten miles in diameter and there were no dwellers on it. Orders were immediately given for the creation of my home there. I remained quartered in my ship attended only by Wuj until the structure was complete. That did not take long because they used prefabricated space-housing.

I soon found that I got along well enough if I allowed Smallways to handle things. I made him therewith my Prime Minister.

He knew where all the mining camps were located and he knew the business of the place. Regularly he reported to me and gave me lists of how much ore had been mined, how much crystal farmed and so on.

I grew impatient for the time to come when we would have our domain announced to the worlds of the Interplanetary Union and we could exchange ambassadors. That was after all the role I longed to play—to handle the affairs of state, the questions of war and peace, the matters of treaty and boundaries and the role of diplomat.

AS I LOLLED in my palace at Ajax I planned my campaigns. First the redemption of my good name by a studied campaign of propaganda through the inhabited worlds. We would have skilled penmen write articles praising the brilliance and ingenuity of my people, their culture and industry. Of course I did not see any awesome signs of this myself but propaganda, as the true leader knows, has no relation with reality. Suffice it that the people of Earth and Mars and Venus would believe it were so.

Often have I heard that if you believe a thing, it is so. Had I not believed in my own destiny and was it not indeed materializing? Justly as Ajax wishes, so Ajax gets.

Coupled with that would come my personal campaign. To put over the dignity and desirability of myself. "Ajax of Ajax" I would be known as and my writings on the affairs of the universe would be read with appreciation on the front pages of every newsprinter and upon the screens of every radiovisor.

From Radio Ajax, which we would build, would come forth volumes of good will programs.

Then of course when the time was ripe we would start our subtle campaigns to elect Ajaxites to the councils of worlds and gradusally to gain more and more in numbers. Then, that Day would come when we would hold the control and the great coup d'etat when I would enter the chamber of the Interplanetary Council and with my loyal followers sweep it aside as I proclaimed myself Emperor.

Ah, I leaned back and gazed at the ceiling in contemplation. Above through the glassy domes I could see the stars moving and the slow majestic swing of my planets as they passed again and again through our central point.

Dreamily I outlined my ideas to Wuj. He listened with interest.

"Why not announce the Fore-Trojan Kingdom yourself, now?" he suggested.

A thought! A true stroke of genius. Why wait for Smallways to act? Was I not ruler?

I leapt from my throne and sped to the great radio sender I maintained. I opened the switch, heated it up, and finally got Radio Juno on the screen.

The amazed operator stared at me as I stood proudly before the sender and announced to him to convey to the I. U. my royal greetings and would they send a diplomat to discuss the opening of relations. The Juno operator took the record in dumb wonder and switched off.

I relaxed and waited. When Smallways came in on his usual report, I told him nothing.

THE LITTLE greenbeard was frankly becoming tiresome to me. He was always loyally respectful but he took too much work on his shoulders. And I never did stoop to asking him the whys of his odd whiskers.

Business, he said, was going wonderfully. Trade was flourishing, new armaments had been put in, several hundred new immigrants had arrived (I supposed from other asteroids), the planets were all in good order.

Agamemnon, I now learned, was the seat of the new armaments depot which he had established. It was now the equal of Hector in population as it nearly was in size. Achilles was being given over entirely to

crystal farming. Nestor and Odysseus were being doubled in mining output. The supply of spare ship engines and stores of fuel were finally completed on the other side of Ajax.

He left and shortly afterward Radio Juno buzzed. I answered it.

From the screen a hard visaged soldier's face looked out. I recognized the features of Geoffrey Chang Crackowitz, General of the Interplanetary Police. He was grim and unsmiling.

I drew myself up to my proudest height and fingered the handle of my sword.

"Yes," I said haughtily.

"Are you King Ajax of the Trojans?" he said with never a smile and looking like a magistrate ot a city court.

I thrilled to his recognition of my title and at the same time chilled to the hard tones he used. "We are," I said aloofly.

"Are you responsible for the dirty work that's been going on for the past five months?" he said harshly.

I drew myself up and denied knowledge of anything wrong. Wuj sidled up to me and stared with wonder at the speaker.

General Crackowitz looked down at his desk a second, picked up a paper and read:

"Smuggling dope and narcotics into forty-seven mining camps in the asteroid belt.

"Selling weapons to known criminals and dangerous elements.

"Carrying on propaganda designed to stir up trouble and undermine the authority of the police.

"Carrying on gambling dens on asteroids as yet unidentified, now presumed to be Hector and Achilles.

"Piracy, including raiding on Jovian moons. Sacking and robbery of three outer-planet bound vessels.

"Have your people been responsible for all this?"

I was dumbfounded. At once I felt sure that Smallways had been up to something. But I declined to discuss it. I demanded an ambassador.

THE general stared at me.

"King Ajax," he said (and I thrilled again), "we'll be patient. You claim to be ruler. We suggest that you investigate this matter and turn the culprits over to us for punishment. If you stop this affair, we'll send you an envoy to talk business. If you can't stop this business, we'll send you an ambassador of ships to wipe out this nest ourselves."

I drew myself up and accepted his conditions. What else could I do? A light began to dawn on my mind and I realized that I had been used by Smallways and his gang.

My money and credits had been used to buy ships to carry on his dirty work. Mining! Now I knew why I had seen no mines. And why Anton had always insisted that making inspections was not royal work and should be left entirely to him.

I sat back on my throne and pondered. I watched the planetoids swing back and forth overhead. My situation was very bad and yet for the first time, the Interplanetary Union actually recognized me!

At the height of triumph, disaster!

I thought. "Wuj," I said finally, "do you suppose that there really are spare ship engines and fuel dumps on the other side of Ajax?"

The spider crouched on his long legs and said: "Yes. I have several times wandered around and I did see them. They are just on the opposite pole, about seven miles away."

I thought again. Then got down. Getting into my space-suit I told Wuj to do likewise and we would inspect these stations.

Wuj's suit was odd and he looked like a most curious monster indeed with eight legs enclosed in robberoid and a great glass bowl over his body.

We set out and in long leaps and glides in the low gravity made our way soon to the place Wuj had mentioned.

There was an enclosure there and indeed it was filled with many dismantled and stacked rocket tubes, feeders, and great tanks of fuel.

The place was unguarded and I walked around inspecting everything. With a start I recognized the bitter truth. All these spare parts had been taken from old ships and not bought brand new as Anton had claimed.

In fact it was obvious that they were taken from ships which must have been the victims of piracy.

Piracy on the grandest scale ever known Using the little known and unsuspected Trojans as a base, Smallways and his huge gang had plundered the system successfully and it had been my credits and fortune that had given them their great start. What a small price it had been to pay to allow me a throne!

I FUMED inside my helmet and found myself searching for a way to redeem my honor and outwit these scoundrels.

As I watched the planetoids swing back and forth an idea came to me. I knew how I could force the surrender of the entire gang without bloodshed!

I outlined it to Wuj and he agreed. Together we set to work in the supply depot.

Carefully we up-ended each rocket tube and ship engine. When all the tubes were pointing skywards (and it was easy to move these massive pieces in a world where nothing has any appreciable weight), we ran supply lines to the great fuel tanks and connected everything up to a firing board.

I had made of the entire field a monster hundred-tubed ship engine—an engine strong enough to move this planetoid!

We then went back to my palace and entered my ship, the Destiny II. Driving back again to the engine field, we parked by the side of it and watched the movements of the planetoids.

Ajax was the smallest of the planetoids but in this intricate little system of six each was so finely balanced that the movement of one would affect all the others. Each worldlet passed and repassed through the central point. No two ever passed the same point at the same time. Their orbits were so intricately balanced that they acted to keep each other firmly fixed in their paths and speed so that never could they crash.

Sometimes one world would pass another close, sometimes one would swing way out and then come crashing back only to have the five others all swinging away from the point of intersection. It was more intricate than the most fine of watches.

WHAT I planned was this. When Hector and Agamemnon, the two largest planetoids and also the two big centers of the Smallways gang, were at opposing ends and starting their swing back toward the same point, it was only the action of Ajax, my planet, that balanced sufficiently to slow one down and speed up the other so that they would not crash.

Now by operating my engine field, I could catch Ajax at the farthest point in its swing and hold it there by rocket action. That would remove the counterbalance and cause Hector and Agamemnon to crash head-on at the intersection point. That in turn would bring the three others into confusion.

By that method I could wipe out the entire gang, keep Ajax intact and save something of my throne. The planetoids could be repopulated later from immigration.

Anxiously I waited and then, when the precise moment had come and the two moon-like globes hung at opposite sectors of the sky, I started my blast.

The hundred giant tubes flared up. A terrific shove was given to the planet Ajax. The monster forces roared to hold it back from starting the next phase of its swing.

Tremors shook my little world but still the flames roared up. I watched. For a moment the moon-like spheres of the Trojan asteroids seemed to stand still in the sky.

My hour of triumph seemed at hand.

Then, suddenly I gaped, for I noticed that the planetoids were moving outward instead of inward! They began again to move away from the intersection point! To move outward again!

The radio buzzed. I snapped it on. The face of Smallways glared out from it. His green beard waved wildly.

"What are you doing, you dumbox!" he shouted.

I yelled back that I knew him for a pirate and scoundrel. He stared furiously.

"We'll get even with you, Ajax!" he shouted. Then, to my amazement, he reached up to his face and pulled at his nose.

His whole face came away and behind it there was revealed a great mass of green hair from which two blazing eyes glared. The beard was only the lower part of this hairy mass.

"A Saturnian," Wuj yelped. I remembered the few stories that the few explorers to Saturn proper had told. The terrible hairy face that lived there which always plotted against mankind. Anton Smallways was a Saturnian spy!

I waved my fist at him.

"You're licked, Smallways," I shouted. "Your worlds are going to crash."

"Look outside, you fool," he shouted and snapped off.

I gazed again. The outward drive of all the asteroids was gaining.

Instead of falling back to the central point, my action in pushing back Ajax had released the bonds of all the system. All the planets were now rushing away from the point on Jupiter's orbit as fast as they could. They were swinging away wildly to be lost forever in space, scattered to the ends of the universe.

But, at least, I thought, I shall have my

own planet Ajax intact here on Jupiter's orbit. But I gazed again and looked at my instruments and groaned.

Ajax was roaring under full rocket blast and without possibility of stopping directly toward the planet Saturn!

As the Destiny II pulled away from the planet and started its long weary journey back to the inner worlds, the thought came to me as to why Anton Smallways' beard was green. Saturnians are color blind. He had thought it was brown all along!

THE END

Once in a Blue Moon

(Continued From Page 38)

"Ordinarily...do not...private reflections...others...but if...promise not divulge...source...information...and if... ...be allowed...borrow...peculiar expression...Mattawomba...delver...dead languages...would say ... Rodney ... female Earthling...characteristic...giving you the works"

Although this communication was not directed at Rodney, it activated a dim tremor of resonance in a hypersensitized area of her emotions. She sensed that something was transpiring in the Martian's mind—although they were in different compartments of the *Hermes*—which concerned matters very much present in her current reveries.

An arrow of thought, barbed with suspicion, twanged into the Martian's brain:

"Ilrai, keep your nose out of this!"

And his response came back, bland as fine oil:

"I cannot do otherwise. I have none."

These exchanges, swift as beams of light, were imperceptible to Captain Jutland.

"Let us reserve our decisions until the time for them arrives," he advised. "But before signing off, I must say that, as an improbable sequence of improbable events, what you have just told me isn't likely to happen once in—"

He groped for a phrase, failed to find it, concluded with an air of compromise:

"Well, not once in a Martian life-time."

THE END

Raymond Destiny . . . a great human body in which something unthinkably dreadful seemed to have its being . . .

Illustration by John R. Forte, Jr.

TWILIGHT OF TOMORROW

A tale of Time and a Conqueror, and of a search through Yesterday for that which would safeguard Tomorrow.

THIS is the tale of Time and a Conqueror, and to which of the two the final Conquest belonged. . . .

The Conqueror's name Raymond Destiny. Say, rather, that he called himself Raymond Destiny. He was the dramatist first, the Conqueror after, for he made the one dependent upon the other.

Environment generally makes Conquerors. If the times are troubled and the people ready, a man will arise and say, "Follow me!" and they will follow, and war will reign the earth. If the times are peaceful and the people content, then history will record one less hero.

Raymond Destiny was the exception to that rule. He was the exception to most rules. Men followed him in those years of peace because they were afraid of him. Not the ordinary, common fear of physical violence, but the ultimately terrifying fear of the unknown. He had no past. Those who knew it died, and those who wondered why they died, died too. For he was the perfect stagemanager; one who never forgot the smallest detail, and he

by JOSEPH GILBERT

(Author of "The Man Who Knew Roger Stanley", "Conquest", etc.)

knew the value of a mysterious, unknowable past. Some of the rumors that sprang up concerning him were spawned first in the terrible depths of his strange mind, others grew out of the centuries-old superstition of man, and he denied none, and encouraged all. Men wondered how he had forced an entire city council to turn over their city, alone and unarmed, in his earlier days, and knowing not of the grenade with which he, standing quietly before them, had threatened to blow them and himself to tiny bits if they did not—men knowing nothing of this, said that he was the devil in human flesh. Wherein they spoke truer than they knew.

This, then, was the creature that stood in brooding silence, arms folded across his chest, in the great white laboratory, staring unmoving at the cleared space in the center of the floor.

A murmur of repressed excitement whispered in the laboratory from the small group of men in the place. There was motion in the air where the space was cleared, a whirl of half-seen things, a flash of color. Then the space was no longer clear.

The machine that had appeared in the center of the floor was a great hollow ball with a flattened base. It stood some ten feet off the floor, and was about seven feet in width at its widest point. Its surface was smooth, unbroken, and constructed of some dull, silvery metal.

The door of the contrivance opened, and a man stepped out.

There was silence. Deep silence. The room was tense with the drama of the moment. Then the man stepped forward, bowed, and said, "Great One, your humble servant salutes you." He timed the whole thing excellently.

Raymond Destiny's deep, resonant, carefully trained voice reverberated through the laboratory. "You have traveled in time?"

The man drew himself up. "I have."

Raymond Destiny said, "Follow me."

THEY left the laboratory, and people within with their curiosity, and walked down a long deserted corridor.

The lights in the corridor were Howard-Brazier fluorescents and green. They glistened strangely on the perspiration covered face of the man who had stepped from the flat-based sphere. He breathed too hard, and opened and shut his mouth like a man sucking a lemon. His hands were trembling a bit. He said, "Your Greatness—"

Raymond Destiny stopped.

The man said, "I—" He gulped and tried again. "There is an illness after time traveling that you might term time nausea. If you will excuse me—"

Raymond Destiny nodded, and the man disappeared hurriedly. It was about two minutes later when he again appeared. He grinned. "Thought I didn't have anything left in my stomach after I left my lunch back—or rather up—in the time flow. (Wonder if anyone was standing under the deluge up there in the future, incidentally). It's sorta like riding in a rocket for the first time. The dizzy *feel* of years, centuries zipping by gets you feeling so dizzy that you get a queasy feeling in your tummy, and then—whoop! there it goes! The same thing happens, only reversed, when you return to a normal time rate. You've accustomed yourself to the whirl of an accelerated time rate, and when you return to normal it seems abnormal to you. Everything on earth seems to crawl like a snail seen in slow motion. Deuced peculiar sensation."

Destiny said nothing, and they walked the rest of the way to his room in silence. At the entrance Destiny motioned the time-traveler back and stepped up to the glowing panel set in the metal door. The door swung open, hidden relays, operatable only by the detector which was tuned to the dictator's life vibrations, clicking softly.

The splendor of the room inside made the scientist whistle a little, despite the fact that he had seen it before. He dropped into a chair and lit the equivalent of that relic of the twentieth century, the cigarette.

Raymond Destiny stood, a great human body in which something unthinkably dreadful seemed to have its being, gazing down at the man in the chair. He said, "What did you find in the future, Harley?"

The man—Harley—looked up at the strange creature that called itself Raymond Destiny, and quickly glanced away. He had never quite succeeded in rationalizing completely his fear of this being. There was something about the giant body, those hollow, burning eyes, the long hair. Almost laughable! The man looked so much like the popular conception of a poet. A poet with a purpose. A poet who had taken the agony of hell, the glory of heaven, the mad, impossible futility of all life, and

written it into his heart with flaming brands, and now was searching for the answer to the problem he had written, to complete his saga of unguessed horror.

"You won't like it," said Harley. "You won't like it worth a damn."

The thing with the dreamy eyes of a cosmic poet, took two steps, and long slender fingers gripped his shoulder with a strength that made him cry out sharply.

"What did you find in the future, Harley?"

HARLEY twisted around to stare at the fingers that clutched his arm in ludicrous amazement. He had not thought that anything less than metal pincers could clamp his arm in that manner. He looked up at the tall figure above him, the bright light in the room casting out the high, cavernous hollows of the dreamy, aesthetic face, and felt an awe he could not repress. There were men who said that this thing had crossed the Arctic ice pack, and though there was evidence to prove it, Harley had never believed the story until now. What had been in that silent, frozen land that had led him there in the first place, was a mystery that it was perhaps fortunate had never been solved.

Harley tried to jerk his arm from that awful grip and pain made his breath whistle out between his teeth. "You're hurting. . . .my arm."

The hand did not relax.

The scientist tried hard to keep his voice calm and did not entirely succeed. "Do you remember anyone named Donald Mann?"

The hold on his shoulder relaxed with a suddeness that was startling. Harley heard a whisper above him. "I knew it!"

"Yeah, I see you do," said Harley. "He's the one. Three years from now the underground he's developing will throw you and your kingdom over completely. Pardon the bluntness, but I know you prefer to have it straight."

He stood up, rubbing his shoulder.

Raymond Destiny said, "We can bomb him out of existence with your time machine. There is no great problem about this, at least."

Harley shrugged and winced as the movement shot pain through his shoulder. "Bigger than you think. Here on earth when you slam on the brakes of your monocar, you've got good hard earth to press your tires against and pull you to a stop against the force of inertia. When you travel in time, however, you are traveling in the fourth dimension—which is time, of course—and you have neither tires nor earth, only inertia. To stop you've got to throw yourself back in the three ordinary dimensions we're familiar with before you can slam your century-riding buggy to a halt. Anything you drop out of the machine will land in the year it's dropped in, but you can't halt a time-traveler in that fashion. You have to throw a lever in the year 4400, say, and hope fervently that you stop before 4433. I've timed the interval it takes the machine to go through a year, and made a meter that ticks off the years; but it's obvious that I can't drop a bomb on a guy when I have no way of telling for a certainty whether he's below it or a coupla thousand miles away. You yourself didn't know when the machine would stop when it came back. You had to have men watch for it, and inform you when they saw any signs of it reappearing.

"Time is like a strip of old-fashioned motion picture film, with the ends of the film connected together, and run through one of those old projectors; it just keeps repeating itself over and over again. If you know the right spot to splice it and cut out a few feet, you've eliminated a man and changed the course of history, though the respliced film goes on and on with the same background of countries and worlds and the other human constants. But you can't figure the proper spot in the future to slice out Donald Mann because there are so many factors influencing the time required for the machine to settle to a stop out of the fourth into the third, that—but, hell, you know all this theory perhaps better than I do." He drew a deep breath after he had finished the long recital.

"You must get rid of Mann someway!"

THE abandoned anguish, the terror in that voice surprised Harley so much that his cigarette fell from his hands, and fell on the rug. It smouldered there, scorching a hole in the priceless carpet, and no one payed the slightest heed.

And then it was that Harley understood; understood how it was, gazing at the contorted face of the giant in the center of the floor, that while this strange, weird being with the dark, poetic face would have

died laughing in the face of unthinkable torture, that while death and physical violence held no terror for him; that nevertheless his nature was such that he lived for domination. To break men's souls, that was his purpose. That explained why he would never kill a man if it could be helped; a dead man was a man he could not control.

Thus it was that the breaking up of his kingdom meant more to him than the death that would accompany it—it meant that he would no longer *know* that he was the master of the best part of the civilized world, and that the men in it no longer repressed a shudder when they heard his name. To the thing men knew as Raymond Destiny, there was only one worthwhile thing in life, and that was the pleasure of seeing the fear in men's eyes when he approached. It was to him as worship would have been to another. Without it life, for Raymond Destiny, would have been a bitter, barren, ultimately empty thing.

Harley put a foot slowly on the smouldering cigarette and crushed it out, keeping his eyes on the floor, and feeling absurdly embarrassed as Raymond Destiny regained his grip on himself. What it meant to the world Conquerer to lose that grip, only Harley dared even guess.

Raymond Destiny said, "You will go back in time and destroy this Donald Mann." Harley looked up into the face of the other man, and the awful determination in the words Harley had just heard, burned like hell-fires in the black pits of the eyes of the Conqueror.

Harley swallowed. "Same objection, altho we can probably get around it with a little research. Problem is: how to pick a year in which he is in one city every day of that year. I can't heave a bomb overside into any certain day or month; I have to drop it as we zip through a year. We have bombs that will lower a city to the ground. Now we have to—"

"In my childhood," said Raymond Destiny dreamily, "there was a lad named Donald Mann who lived in the same city as I. Perhaps certain . . . occurrences . . . in which I figured prominently account for his present plans to eliminate me. It is not an unlikely possibility.

"Up to a certain year I resided in that city. Then I moved to another. Mann's family was not wealthy. They never went on a vacation. Since this was in his childhood, if you drop one of our most efficient explosives on that city in the year after I left —You follow me?"

Harley said, "I'll have to have the machine transported to the spot where the bomb I haven't dropped yet blew up the city." Destiny nodded. Harley asked, "What was the year you left this city?"

Destiny told him. "I'll start tomorrow. Early." said Harley. He turned and left the room without another word.

IT WAS not dark in the time machine. Generators hummed their little song of power, and the green fluorescents lit the tiny flat-bottomed sphere without casting shadows. Harley whistled Schubert's "Ave Maria" endlessly while testing the wiring of the panel with the dials and switches covering its face. The tune was one of his favorites. Then, with no hesitation at all, he sat down in the chair before the panel, clicked in a switch, and spun the arm of a metal pointer to "on" position.

The hum of the generators rose to a louder thup! thup! of a noise, and there was a crackling in his ears as the time-traveling device was charged with the "time" vibrations. When he vanished from the sight of observers outside he never knew. There was no indication of the immersion into the fourth dimension, no jar, no movement of any kind.

He stood up and stretched himself. After which he walked the floor, casting hesitant glances at the instrument panel. If he didn't look out he wouldn't get sick. Oh, hell, it wouldn't take him long to become acclimated, and the scenery was really remarkable. He reached over and did something to the panel, and simultaneously there were two sounds, so alike that they sounded almost as one. One was the smooth outer protective panel sliding back to expose the observation glass; the other was the opening of a similar panel in the base of the device, to expose nothing whatever. Just nothing. Lots of nothing.

Harley kept his eyes from the opening in the floor, and gazed out through the observation port at the world outside. It was a continuous swooping procession of light and dark, and blossoming trees that died and blossomed again, as night followed day, and season followed season. Only the trees weren't trees; they were geometrical nightmares. He looked up in the sky where the sun whipped across the world and vanished

as soon as it went to return again as swiftly. It was a sun with angles and twists and curvatures that made his eyes cross to look at it. He was glad that the blinding flash of day followed instantly by night prevented him from seeing it more plainly. And the stars —

He turned from the port with a resigned sigh, lay down before the open portal in the floor, and was very, very sick.

When he had finished losing his lunch, he sat up and stared at the instrument panel. Then he jumped frantically to his feet with a strangled exclamation, and tore the carefully wrapped object in the small closet out of its packing. He was in his year and almost out of it before he had set the detonators on the side of the deadly instrument and tossed it overboard—

IF A BOMB in the twentieth century were to be dropped on a city across a river, the pilot would have dropped it on the side of the river across from the city. Forward motion did the rest.

Harley's bomb landed in the year before the one it was dropped in, naturally enough.

. . .

THE TALE is told. The tale of a Conqueror who conquered America, most of Europe, all of South America, and part of Asia, and who would have eventually conquered it all, and looked to the stars for new conquests and new souls to rule. A man and a Conqueror such as this world has never known before. A man named Raymond Destiny who ruled the earth.

He never existed.

RAIN OF FIRE

(Illustrated by John B. Musacchia.)

CHAPTER I

THE FIRST outbreak of the fire-rain occurred in a farming section of the Eastern Atlantic seaboard, not far from the Virginia Capes on the night of June 4th, 2013. Quite evidently it was completely localized—just a few square miles of a somewhat lonely agricultural neighborhood with no large center of population involved.

The weird phenomenon was first observed—or at least certainly first reported—by a farmer named Smith. He was returning to his isolated home somewhat after midnight, a sultry windless night, with a leaden sky almost solidly overcast. Farmer Smith first noticed, a hundred feet or so above one of his own cornfields, that a small point of fire had appeared in the air, drifting slowly down. Startled, he stopped his roller-car and stood by the roadside watching.

Little spores drifting down—to blossom into flowers of flame upon an unsuspecting world. What did it mean? And what was the connection between the mysterious rain of fire and Phorgos, tiny satellite of distant Jupiter?

An amazing little puff of fire, it was—red-green, with a yellowish rim—a burning little flame, almost weightless, coming slowly down. He judged that it was perhaps the size of his head. And then he gasped, numbed. In the dimness, beyond his own field and over that of one of his neighbors, another little burning ball had appeared. Five hundred feet up, perhaps. Then another, and another.

Farmer Smith in those startled seconds could only stare blankly. And suddenly the little fire-ball nearest him, burst into a myriad tiny fragments! A weird, pyrotechnic display. A shower of red-green sparks drifting to the ground. But the sparks had duration; one of them, still burning, fell near him on the road. He dashed and stamped upon it, and it was extinguished with a tiny exploding sizzle beneath his heavy shoe.

Fire rain! A panic of numbed terror swept Farmer Smith as now he stared around him. The night was illumined with a lurid red-green sheen. Like falling, flaming raindrops, the weird shower seemed everywhere. The tiny persisting sparks began falling on him; with wildly flailing hands, he brushed them off. He was aware that smoke was rising from his field. A glare that was the roof of his nearby barn was visible. A silent rain of fire, through which in a wild panic he ran, shielding his face, brushing at his clothes as the burning sparks fell upon him. And from his nearby home, in the weird lurid silence he could hear his wife and young daughter running out, screaming.

That first manifestation of the fire rain had a duration of probably only a hundred and twenty seconds; then the myriad falling globules of flame burned themselves out, with no more appearing above them. The outbreak was completely localized; a mile of radius doubtless, with the Smith homestead perhaps its center. In that stricken area crop damage was considerable; and several homes and outbuildings were set on fire. The conflagrations were easily stemmed. Farmer Smith had in a panic summoned the local fire-quenchers, an inadequate rural outfit bogged down with obsolete equipment. But the mechanized rollers came from the County Headquarters. And from Washington a Federal Fire-fighting airplane was dispatched.

THAT WAS the first outbreak. There was a near-panic in all the local towns

by RAY CUMMINGS

Then it began firing weird missles.

of that neighborhood, the newscasters, that next day, filled the airwaves with a multitude of wild theories. A meteor-shower of some new type. They even suggested that some maniacal trickster—conceiving himself to be the inventor of a new indulgence in pyromania — had showered that farming neighborhood with some of the old-fashioned skyrockets, Roman candles, and the like, as I believe the things were called.

But the weird affair soon was forgotten.

And then, near the end of June, it came again. Still on the Atlantic Seaboard—over the sprawling industrial city of Charleston, this time — the same lurid, soundless rain of fire. The same type of night, sultry and overcast.

That was on the night of June 22-23. And the conflagrations in the city of Charleston raged all that next day, before the ground and airplane fighters could bring them under control. The Federal Air-force of the Fire-Fighting Department of Washington was dispatched almost in its entirety. . .

The next night there was a similar outbreak over Savannah, in the Department of Gerogia.. A menace to the United States? Panic-stricken people, instinctively discarding the wild theories that this was some natural phenomenon, envisaged some band of maniacs, perhaps from abroad. . .

The United States? A fire-storm which must have been some fifty miles in extent was reported from the jungle country of Equatorial Africa. That was the night of

the 25th. The next night there was an outbreak over Buenos Aires—three or four of them along the Atlantic Coast of South America. Two nights later, one in Europe; and on July 2nd, one so heavy and of such long duration above the Japanese Dependency that the crowded city of Tokyo, with its flimsy dwellings, was almost completely destroyed. . . Six days, from the Orient, again to Europe. Great-London was showered with the tiny red-green globules of flame on the night of July 8th. . .

The unknown! The whole world was in a panic, this first week in July. Frantic Governments with their scientific staffs were urgently exhorting the people to be calm. It was some weird natural phenomenon. It would pass. Or even if not, then it would be explained; and science would check it. . .

I WAS AT THIS time one of the Junior News-Gatherers of the Anglo-American Public-Information Service, stationed in York City—largely an indoor man, with my night-desk on the hundred and tenth floor of the huge Apis Building. News-gathering is not, and never was, my real vocation. By training, and desire, I am—to give it a high-sounding title—an Interplanetary Navigator. So far, it had only been theoretical training, under Dr. John Livingston, a friend of my father's, Dr. Livingston had promised me an opportunity, should one arise.

Quite by chance, the illness of one of my friends with Apis, had given me, temporarily, his post. . . And almost at once, as a novice at newsgathering, I was flung into this chaos of the fire-rain! I cannot attempt to picture those nights through the latter part of June and into July when I sat at my desk with the stream of bulletins pouring in at me . . I was only a tiny cog in a vast machine—my job in the night-telecast division of the local Great New York Westchester area. The whole thing was a complete chaos to me. A nightmare of terror, spreading over the Earth. The terror of the unknown, that was the worst part of it. And there is nothing more communicable than fear, the Federal Authorities of Public Welfare, in Washington, had drummed that into all of us. My job—the job of every one of us—was to allay panic—to twist all facts into a semblance of optimism! For myself, I know I was a miserable failure at it. There was nothing of the kind, in me. But it was necessary. So far, the loss of life directly from the fire rain had not been severe. But the panics, every night now occurring somewhere on the Earth, were causing deaths which frighteningly were numerous. In Buenos Aires, for instance, a crowded auditorium became, that night of the fire rain, a shambles of crushed bodies as the people struggled to escape. And that particular fire-proofed structure remained completely untouched throughout the ten minute fire-storm!

THEN CAME that memorable night of July 10th when Dr. Livingston abruptly sent for me. I recall that when Dr. Livingston called me on the split-wave Apis-code Audiphone Service, I was at my desk—and Tom Simms was with me. I had been fortunate in having him a good part of this last week—fortunate for me, though unfortunate for him. He was my best friend; we had been in Government School together. He was in the Federal Division of the National Fire-fighting Airplane Service. An expert pilot, he had flown his ten-man-crew unit into nearly every part of the world, fighting the fire-rain. Then, down in Brazil he had crashed; had been severely burned. But it wasn't like young Simms to stay hospitalized very long; he had come back to New York. He could limp around pretty well covered with bandages, and because he had to do something, he spent most of his time at my desk, trying to give me a lift—and giving me, certainly, very accurate and generally pretty gruesome first-hand pictures of what it was like actually to fight these weird outbreaks.

"They've got some of the ashes—the pure stuff," I recall he was telling me, just before Dr. Livingston's call came.

"Who has?"

"Got it in the Washington Labs now—Bureau of Standards has it. A globule that didn't burn out and get disseminated. The ashes of whatever the devil it is that drifts down and then bursts into flame in the lower atmosphere. It's pretty queer stuff, what I hear."

He grinned at me—his freckled, boyish face just a little oval of eyes, nose and mouth in the midst of a white bandage. "Tell your public," he said, "we'll know all about it soon. Then we'll spot it before it ignites—spray it in the air—and then there won't be any fires."

"That's wishful thinking," I said.

"Well, it's a good line anyway," he grinned. "Your friend, Dr. Livingston was down in Washington yesterday. I bet he's on it."

"Probably is. . .Here, Tom, sort out these flimsies if you want to be helpful. That's the Mediterranean area—something new tonight. A drizzle of fire instead of a storm. But by those reports it's about a two hundred mile area. Most of it burns out in mid-air. That's an improvement anyway."

"Well, here's one that isn't."

He tossed me a teletyped flimsy. Naples, Palermo and Genoa simultaneously were burning. And there was fire-rain in a mile-wide drift reported over the sea near Malta.

DR. LIVINGSTON'S call was on both audible and visible wave. His thin face, with shock of iron-grey hair above, was grim and drawn.

"You, George Harper? Look here—you tell your Boss you're checking off for tonight. I want you to come up here to me at once. . .Who's that there with you? Oh, I see him. Hello Simms—"

"How do you do, Doctor...You remember me?"

"Yes. And I've heard about you—quite a bit recently. . .George, listen—start at once. I'm at my observatory—North Westchester . . .Can you come with him, Simms?"

"Can I? Just watch me—"

"I'll expect you in an hour." he clicked off summarily, his voice fading and his face on my little hooded image-grid vanishing.

We took my small air-car from the roof of the Apis Building; it wasn't more than thirty minutes before we were landing on Dr. Livingston's private stage, near the metal building set here on a wooded hillside. His lab and his observatory were here. A man of independent means, Livingston had conducted only private research for the last few years. He had here, I knew, a small but exceedingly powerful electro-telescope of a design known only to himself.

He was waiting in his living room for us. We could see now evidence of the strain he must have been under, these past few weeks. His clothes were wrinkled, dishevelled—his linen soiled, his hands stained by chemicals. His fingers trembled as he lighted a cigarette cylinder, eyes bloodshot from lack of sleep.

"I think I know what this thing is!" he told us suddenly, without preface. "This fire-rain—I'm quite sure, now, that it is the spontaneous combustion of tiny, almost microscopic spores. At a very high altitude—a hundred thousand feet perhaps, they are released into our atmosphere to drift down."

"Released?" I murmured.

"Released—a falling bomb, so to speak. It shatters. The scattered spores drift down—at varying low altitudes they ignite. . . Oh, I can't pretend that I have identified the nature of the weird chemicals involved." He waved away our questions. He was talking swiftly now, his grim words tumbling over each other. "I know what you want to say. A bomb? That this, then, is a man-made thing, not a natural phenomenon. Not an aberration of nature. Of course it isn't. It's a man-made menace, George. And it can devastate our Earth! But it isn't a menace from anyone, or any thing, here on Earth. I've told them in Washington what I suspect; they're talking of arranging an expedition. But a big thing like that, under government auspices moves slowly, and we've no time—"

"An expedition? To do what?" I demanded.

He shrugged hopelessly. But there was in his bloodshot gaze the fire of a man who has determined to do something, however desperate. "Nobody has talked much of what can be done. It's all so much the unknown. But it's definitely an attack; bombs are being released into our stratosphere."

HE GESTURED toward the little oval doorway of the room here, which I knew led into his private observatory. "You may not know it, George, but my small telescope in there—my own design—not super-powerful for long range—but at any short distance—a thousand miles or so—there's nothing on Earth that can equal it. And I've seen—just a week ago I saw it first—"

He paused, then added: "There's a small spaceship hovering out there—a thousand miles out, I'd guess it. I saw it night before last quite clearly. A strange design. The Earth is turning under it, of course—our surface passing under the perpendicular of it at a thousand miles an hour. And occasionally it shifts its position."

"And releases bombs to drop upon us?" I gasped.

"Exactly that. To devastate—not to destroy us now, perhaps. Possibly this is only a tentative try; a first experiment. Fire rain

—to soften us. To prepare us for an invasion—"

He waved away a gasping question from Simms. "I think I know where the ship has come from! One of the moons of Jupiter." Instinctively he had lowered his voice. He added swiftly: "Don't question me now. I have information—I've kept it secret more than five years. Entirely a personal matter—but I'll explain it to you, some other time."

"An attack from a moon of Jupiter?" I echoed.

"Yes. That's what I conceive it to be. And George—I don't dare wait for a big Government expedition to get under way. It might be too late."

"So what are you going to do?" I asked. "You—sent for me and Tom—"

"At my Mahopak shop I've been building a little space-flyer of my own," he said. "My own design—my own money. I've been at it three years—keeping it more or less secret. It was my idea—you recall, George, I promised I'd watch for an opportunity for you? This was what I meant."

"For me?" I murmured.

"An exploratory flight. Spaceflight is so new—just this last generation—I thought I'd take a hand in it and contribute what I could. An expedition which I controlled myself; you see? And as it happens, the ship is ready now. I'm too old to go myself—and I think perhaps I'm needed more here on Earth in this crisis. So I want to send you—and Simms here, if he wants to go. Perhaps you can track down this enemy ship. Scare it off, maybe...Oh I know I'm talking desperate stuff—but what else can I think of? I've plans—we'll talk it all over. Just tell me now—will you go? Will you try it?"

The unknown. Numbed, I stared at him . . . I would try it, of course. . .

"Will we go?" Simms burst out. "Will a duck swim? The doc said I could get most of these damn bandages off in another three days. When do we start?"

CHAPTER II

WE WERE ready within a week. It was an exciting, chaotic week for Simms and me; he got his bandages off. His freckled, pug-nosed face, with its shock of bristling red hair above, was puckered with scar-tissue so that it gave him a grotesque sort of grimace. But the doctors said it would wear off in time. Except that the Washington authorities knew of our departure, the whole thing was kept secret.

Our ship was small—only some sixty feet long—nevertheless compared to those few which have preceded it, it was well equipped; electronic plates for the augmentation of gravity pull, and countergravity units, with the Argon rocket streams for atmospheric flight.

Young Simms and I, during that week of preparation, abruptly learned that there were to be three of us in the expedition. Dr. Livingston introduced us to our companion—a stocky, bullet-headed young fellow from mid-Europe: Hans Grosse. It was in connection with him that Livingston now told us why he suspected that this menace originated on one of the moons of Jupiter.

"Hans' father," he told us, "was one of my best friends. Indeed, he taught me much of what I know of spaceship construction. Seven years ago he built, and I helped him, a small vehicle of his own."

Grosse Senior, we gathered, had been somewhat a queer sort of fellow. A woman-hater; very possibly Hans' mother wronged him. Of that, Dr. Livingston did not speak. At all events, with not much admiration for our Earth civilization at all, Grosse had departed alone on an exploratory trip. In some three years he had returned; told Livingston that he had landed upon Phorgos. The molten, semi-fluid surface of great Jupiter, supports no life; nor any of the moons, probably, except Phorgos. Grosse had found there a well-developed but weird little civilization—mechanized, upon a bleak, utterly inhospitable little world.

"He lived among them," Livingston explained. "Taught their leaders a little English. Then he returned to me—and to see Hans, whom we had placed in Government School here. But Grosse was ill—mortally ill though he did not know it; he died here within a month."

"And he didn't want you to make public what he had found out there?" I said. "Why not?"

"He felt strongly that any contact between Earth and Phorgos could only bring evil. They treated him well—or at least, he told me so. And he described our Earth to them; they were interested—"

"I'll bet they were," I commented.

Dr. Livingston ignored my sarcasm. "Of one thing I'm sure," he went on earnestly. "Grosse had no possible intimation of any

trickery from the Phorgians. So far as he knew, they had not developed spaceflight."

"They probably learned it from him," Simms suggested.

That too, Dr. Livingston ignored. "Whatever the cause, now after three years, they have attacked us. Diabolical enemies—there is no question of that. Phorgos is bleak, inhospitable; our Earth is very different." His tone went grim again. "They're preparing for an invasion—what else can we think? This fire-rain—what else can it be but a weapon to weaken us—"

THAT was the general gist of Dr. Livingston's explanation. I recall that Simms and I exchanged glances. Somehow a lot of that part about Grosse Senior seemed rather lame. I'm sure the same thought occured to us both: was Dr. Livingston perhaps the dupe of his friend? Had Grosse Senior died before he could put into operation plans which would have shocked and horrified Livingston had he suspected them?

At all events, somehow neither Simms nor I could seem to like young Hans Grosse. But we did not show it; he was an extraordinarily good technician; he understood the mechanical workings of our little ship thoroughly. As Navigator, I was in charge. And Grosse, extremely willing, obeyed my orders unquestioningly. . . .

I need not detail our outward flight. The outbreaks of fire-rain on Earth, up until a night or two before we left, were still occurring. Then suddenly they seemed to have ceased. We saw no enemy ship, though we circled tensely at some fifteen hundred miles out, scanning the monstrous black, star-strewn vault of the abyss. A needle in a haystack. It was that, of course. Was it still here, or had it departed? We had no way of guessing.

Then at last we headed for Jupiter. We really had no plans, save to make a cautious landing, observe what we could of the enemy's activities and come back to report. By that time, it was hoped, the Government expedition would be ready. It was a long, tense voyage—out past the orbit of Mars, heading for giant Jupiter with full attraction until finally we picked up dense little Phorgos as it came swiftly rounding its parent world.

Still there had been no sign of any other ship. And finally, at some six or seven thousand feet of altitude, we burst suddenly through an envelopment of clouds and had our first view of Phorgos. Strange little world. With Simms and young Grosse beside me in the control turret we gazed down breathlessly at the fantastic, eerie scene spread now so close beneath us.

It was night. The blazing stars, partly obscured by clouds, were overhead; under us, the surface of Phorgos showed as a great spread of utterly barren, rocky surface, visibly convex. At one segment of the jagged horizon, where serrated tiers of naked hills rose up against the sky, the reflected glare of Jupiter was apparent.

There was no sign of any inhabitants here. Obviously it was the place Dr. Livingston—with his vague knowledge obtained from Grosse Senior—had wanted us cautiously to land.

"We shall haf to be very careful," young Grosse commented. "My father said—much of them live underground. If we can land—and not be seen—get near them—"

His dark eyes gleamed. Certainly our plans were vague enough. For offensive action we were wholly unequipped, naturally. But to learn what we could of the enemy's plans—I hoped at least that we might accomplish that, and get back with our knowledge, safely, to Earth. . .

A thousand feet. In very near the center of this darkened little hemisphere, we poised with our rocket-streams holding us. Great jagged mountains at the close convex horizon had loomed up now. Beneath us, the black barren surface was faintly starlit—a tumbled land of heavy metallic rock, with pits, cave-mouths, great rock-spires and buttes, ravines, crevasses. A land wracked as though by some giant cataclysm of nature. Grim. Forbidding. But there were a few places in the hollows where there seemed a grey silt, like soil in which things might grow. And in some of the hollows, moisture seemed to have gathered.

I dropped us cautiously down into a cauldron depression; Simms and Grosse tensely scanned the dim scene to be sure that we were not discovered. And then we landed. The luminous rocket-streams were extinguished as we gently bumped the rocks and came to rest in the weird eerie silence of the Phorgos night.

DR. LIVINGSTON had told us that the tremendously dense little world would have probably a gravity only slightly less than Earth. We found it so, as our ship's interior artificial gravity snapped off and the

heavy-pressure air hissed in as we opened the pressure-porte.

Then in a little group we stood outside, peering around in the rocky dimness; we had packs with camping equipment, and water and synthetic food; and our few weapons—knives and short-range electro-flash guns.

"Which way?" Simms murmured.

It was my plan to attempt to find some encampment of the Phorgians. With extended exploration our little spaceship, with its luminous rocket-streams, would quickly have been discovered, but on foot we had a chance to remain unobserved. And we could cover a considerable distance, using our darkened, hidden ship as a base. Because of the slight gravity and the open terrain, I figured that within a week we could cover all this section. . .

With me leading, cautiously we started off into the dimness; it was harder going than I had thought—the jagged tumbled rocks, and the heavy air was oppressive. Within half an hour we were all bathed in sweat, and were panting. . .

Simms kept close at my side. "Don't let's get lost," he murmured once. "Ten miles in this direction—then back to the ship?"

"Yes," I agreed.

I felt him pluck at my arm, as he added in an even more cautious undertone: "Say, what the devil is Grosse doing anyway?"

Young Grosse had often loitered behind us. Occasionally he seemed to stoop; in the weird luminous darkness now, his figure was just a blob, twenty feet behind us. He seemed to be scooping at the loose ground, planting something which he had taken from his jacket pocket. It startled me, so that I called sharply:

"Grosse, come here. What are you doing?"

OUR presence on Phorgos not discovered? Our ship with its bubbling swirling gas-streams as it had dropped down into that dark cauldron—we had been wrong in thinking we were not seen! And now we had no warning! With my incautious voice still faintly echoing, I was aware that from a dark rock-cluster near at hand little brown half-naked man-like figures were rising up, leaping at us. A rush of them pounced upon Grosse while he was still stooping over the ground, and another group of them came leaping upon Simms and me.

I got my flash-gun out, was able to send a single bolt. It sizzled at close range into one of the oncoming men; the hideous, weirdly shaped little fellow went leprous, horrible as the blast melted him. What was left of him fell smoking, gruesome at my feet, then hands were gripping me; squishy, plump little brownish bodies pressed me. There were a dozen or more of them—about the height of my shoulder, shaped like a mal-formed Earthman, with huge heads of bulging forehead and protruding middles. They seemed clothed in a grey metallic fabric. Weapons were at their belts, but they did not use them. With gibbering cries a dozen or more of them pounced upon Simms and me.

My gun was knocked away; but I fought, keeping my feet, heaving them off. Their ugly goggling faces squished, smashed as though they were fragile as insects under the blows of my fists. But they were powerful; three of them now were gripping me, with others pulling at my legs trying to throw me.

Then I went down, scrambling, with them piling onto me. I saw, in the rocky dimness, that Grosse was down, overwhelmed by the surge of little brown anatagonists. And then Simms went down. He had been fighting beside me. His flailing hand gripped at my shoulder as he fell; and a scream of agony burst from him, and he lay motionless.

For another moment I fought, but it was useless. When I went limp the little aliens for a moment swarmed on me and then they drew me to my feet. I saw them pulling Simms erect also, but he crumpled, fell when they released him and lay inert. Poor Simms. My best friend. That put a poignant stab into me: it was damnable that of the three of us it would have to be the light-hearted, laughing, but always utterly courageous Tom Simms who would be killed. . .

THE little ring of my captors crowded and lunged against me; the jabbering group pulled at me. They were gesticulating and jabbering in their weird language as they hurried me along—into a little tunnel-passage that seemed to wind downward and through a honeycombed cliff. I stared back for an instant to where poor Simms was lying crumpled. Well, perhaps he was better off; certainly I could anticipate nothing much ahead of me that would be better than a quick death. . .

The tunnel-passage seemed several hun-

dred feet long; and then again we emerged into the dim starlight. It was an inner, circular valley; lights were off to one side where a crowd of figures moved—vague swarming blobs in the dimness. Accursed ill luck that we had not seen this valley so far down beneath its close towering cliffs, as we descended in the ship.

I could not see where Grosse had been taken. The cliffside here along which I was being dragged was dotted with crevasse rifts and cave mouths. It seemed that Grosse had been taken into one of them. Then my captors shoved me into a narrow rift; it opened as they dragged me forward into a small cave-like cell, broken near the top where starlight was straggling down.

I was thrown to a floor of grey metallic silt. One of the little men produced a rope like a long, tough dried vine. They bound me with it, rolled me, an inert bundle, against the wall. Then they departed; I was alone in the dim starlit darkness.

CHAPTER III

HOW long I lay there I have no idea. I know my mind was filled with despair, not only for myself, but for our Earth. My little expedition so swiftly had proven a miserable failure—and this weird enemy was resourceful, powerful with strange diabolic lethal weapons. I had no doubt of that; the fire-rain, only a sample of what was in store for our Earth....I think I dozed at last; nature demands relief, no matter what the circumstances.

I was awakened presently by a thump—a tap—a rattling click as though something had struck the rocks of my cell-wall. It came again, a tiny stone falling from above me. Numbed I stared, and it seemed that overhead a shadow moved, up in the slit through which the faint starlight was straggling. My heart was pounding: was it one of the little marauders, furtively coming here now to do away with me?

Then a blob of figure squirmed through the slit and dropped noiselessly beside me. A voice whispered: "George! George, you're not hurt?"

Simms' voice! Simms—not dead—but here, chuckling softly as he swiftly untied me!

"Tom—why—why I thought—"

"So did they," he murmured. There was blood on his shoulder where a knife had slashed him. "Pretty old trick, but it worked," he chuckled; "I was close behind you when they brought you in here. Been hiding up above—" He gestured up to the slit. "Saw my chance to get in here."

We stood whispering, trying to decide what to do. Our weapons had been taken from us.

"There's quite a bunch of them over at the other side of the valley," Simms whispered. "Seem to have some sort of mechanisms over there—working on 'em."

I gestured toward the dark little passage that led from behind us, out of the cave—the way I had been brought in. It seemed unbarred.

"Two guards at the outer end of it," Simms said. "But you and I can tackle 'em."

That would be our only chance. The slit was twelve or fifteen feet overhead, with no way of climbing up to it.

"You hide," I murmured. "That rock-recess over in the corner. I'll make a noise—bring the guards in here. Then we'll jump."

I lay down, with the loose rope wound around me. But suddenly Simms gripped me. "Listen! One coming now!"

THE darkness of the passage was brightening with a yellow glow. Simms scurried over to the shadows. The glow brightened as one of the creatures, carrying a small flaming torch, came in to look me over. That Phorgian didn't have a chance; he bent down over me and I seized him. His torch fell to the floor and my lunging body extinguished it. My fist smashed into his face, and like a pouncing puma Simms landed on his back. It was noisome, horrible—that smashing, oozing little body. We disentangled ourselves from it and leaped to our feet. Both of us were trembling.

"Probably only one more out at the entrance," Simms muttered. "Come on—let's go."

The guard at the end of the tunnel was sitting hunched. He hadn't heard anything; he didn't see us coming. He had no more chance than the other one, just a second of warning as he tried to rise up and level some sort of weapon at us. But it didn't fire: our rush knocked him down; mashed him. Then, panting, we were out in the starry darkness. The circular valley here with its towering cliffs seemed momentarily deserted in our immediate neighborhood. A quarter of an Earth-mile away, on the other side against the cliffs there, we could see a swarm of the little figures. Moving torches,

Then we were hurtling out into the abyss.

and lights strung on poles—lights which seemed some form of glowing electronic energy.

The area over there was a hive of mysterious activity. Weird-looking mechanisms stood about, seemingly they were being assembled. Lines of the little men struggled with parts of them out from the many tunnel passages. This evidently was the outer activity of a small detachment of the Jovians. I could envisage, down somewhere underground—or perhaps in other surface cauldrons like this one—that there must be fields and weird groups of habitations—agriculture and industry, strange activities unlike anything on Earth doubtless—by which this little race maintained itself.

Whatever the activity elsewhere, certainly there was enough here to puzzle us. Over at the base of the distant cliff a line of metallic globes and cylinders were being assembled. Some were small, not much bigger than a man; others seemed twenty or thirty feet in height and diameter. I suddenly got the idea that they were small, queerly shaped spaceships.

The expeditionary army! Preparations for the invasion of Earth! A portion of what must be going on in other parts of this little world, was spread here before us. Feverish activity. . .and now a new sight startled us: there was a broad inner ledge some forty feet up on the cliff and only a few hundred feet from where we were standing. Our attention was abruptly directed to it by globules of yellow flame which began popping out from it. The fire rain! Little blobs of yellow-green fire, bursting in mid-air, drifting down to the rocky ground. The popping points of flame came from the ledge for a minute or two, and then abruptly ceased.

"Now what in the devil," Simms muttered.

THREE or four of the aliens were up there on the ledge, with a small three-foot cylinder between them. The cylinder lay horizontal in a little rack, its nozzle projecting out toward the empty central area of the valley. And now it began popping again with its rain of fire. Breathlessly we watched. One of the men stood by it, working a lever at its base—the weird deadly spores, compressed into that cylinder, released to stream out, igniting in the air—

The idea of what Simms and I might desperately try to do rushed at me. . .Surely we could not decamp now back to Earth, just futilely to tell of the menace here, which we had seen and fled from! This was our chance; no one from Earth, probably, would ever have it again.

I whispered my plan to Simms. "Well," he muttered dubiously. "Well, maybe—"

"We've got to try it."

The men on the ledge had again ceased working the bomb. Evidently they had been testing it. The glare of the fire rain had died out now; again the broad valley was shrouded in darkness. It was darker than ever, with a sodden-looking cloud-bank obscuring the stars.

Our chance now—now, or never. Cautiously, but swiftly, we followed the cliff-base, darting from one broken pile of rocks to another, pausing, huddled in the hollows, to get our breath, then starting again. Every moment I expected that we might be discovered, but we were not.

"We'll try climbing here?" I whispered into Tom's ear.

"Yes. All right—but watch yourself."

THE broken cliff was easy to climb. There were places where we were safely shadowed; but in others, the reflection from the lights across the valley painted us damnably clear. By some miracle we avoided discovery, came to the ledge—an end of it. From here we could see that the three men who had been testing the bomb projector were lolling now beside its racked little cylinder. They were no more than twenty feet from us. And we saw now that there was another of the cylinder bombs standing at the back of the ledge. From here the whole valley was in plain view. It was empty to the right, but ahead and to the left the beehive of workers was less than a thousand feet away. Would the projector carry that far?

I was praying for a lot of things at that moment—and praying that luck in them all would be with us. . . .We managed to get half way to the three reclining Phorgians, then we plunged. They tried to scramble to their feet; one of them reached for a weapon at his belt, but I hit him in the middle, butting him with lowered head. He fell. The other two in a second were tangled with Simms. I jumped and heaved them off. One tumbled from the ledge; the other lay under Simms and me like a great squashed bug.

But the fight hadn't been soundless; off

across the valley we could see the crowd of squat little men standing staring at us. Gesticulating, gathering in excited groups, shouting at each other. More of them were pouring up from the tunnel mouths now. For a moment they seemed in a startled panic, but it was a brief confusion, for almost at once lines of them began running out into the valley toward us.

"Hurry it!" Simms gasped. "They're aiming—"

Back against the cliff groups of them were trying to level some of ther own projectors at us. I swung the little racked cylinder toward them, fumbled at its trigger lever, the working of which seemed obvious.

Then it began firing. Weird missles. They were invisible until, suddenly, out in the air over the valley the popping points of flame began appearing. A stream of thousands of them, floating in an arc, and then sifting down into a rain of fire.

"No good!" Simms gasped.

I muttered a curse; he was right. Under the sifting rain of little fire-globules, the oncoming lines of attackers scattered sidewise. But they kept on coming. In another minute or two they would reach our cliff and come climbing up.

"Open the damned thing up!" Simms urged. "Won't it shoot any further than that?"

I shoved again at the lever, experimenting desperately to see if it would shift in any other direction. It suddenly slid sidewise. The cylinder in its rack jumped backward with a blasting recoil, and then steadied. Amazing blast! Like a tank of liquid air, suddenly expanding into gas of a billion times greater volume. There were perhaps thirty seconds as the compressed spores burst out in an invisible stream, with a force that must have projected them in a torrential surge against that opposite cliff. And abruptly over there they burst into fire. Not fire rain! This now was a storm, a deluge of flame!

And a weapon such as this—a thousand such weapons probably—to be brought to attack the Earth! For a split second I seemed able to see that it was a vast curtain of fire-dots—billions of tiny flaming dots, like moisture-globules in the spray of a Niagara. But in another split second it was more than that—fire-dots so numerous that they were merged into solid flame. A titanic wave of fire. All that side of the valley, and the cliff there, was engulfed—a wave of fire surging up and over the cliff like a swollen torrent bursting over a dam. . .A giant river of liquid conflagration.

WE saw now that it was backing up on the valley floor, and in the air over the valley—backing up, rolling back at us!

"Come on! Did the job—an' we got to get out of here!" Simms gasped at me.

I was still clinging desperately to the heaving projector. Whether it had finished its ghastly stream of flaming death or not, I have no idea. There was nothing left alive out there in front of us—nothing there but a solid ocean of tumbling flames. The heat here was all but scorching us; I abandoned the projector and we ran. How we ever scrambled down that rocky descent without breaking our necks I can't imagine. Simms fell headlong, the last fifteen feet.

"I'm—all right," he gasped as I picked him up. "Come on—Heavens—look at it!"

From down here on the level we could see nothing but that tidal wave of flame slowly rolling at us. Again we ran, came into the tunnels of the opposite cliff, with the fire momentarily only a glare behind us. And suddenly I mentioned Grosse. In the tense turmoil of that halt hour or so since Simms released me in the cave, neither of us had had opportunity to think of Grosse.

"Well, that's so," Simms admitted. "Matter of fact, I did see where they took him—seemed like a cave not far from where they had you tied up."

"Not far from here, is it?"

"No, not very. Guess I could find it."

For just an instant we stared at each other. I know that the same idea was in both our minds.

"We'll have to find him if we can," I said at last.

IN THE turmoil of the holocaust of the inner valley, whatever Phorgians had been in these tunnels now had fled. Simms found the cave to which he was sure Grosse had been taken; it was empty.

Again we stared at each other. "Well, that's that," I said. "Now if we can get to our ship—"

Again we ran; out of the tunnels, into the open, emerging not far from where we had been captured. There seemed no one here—nothing here but the tumbled rocky desert. It was illumined now by the glare from the inner valley—a great lurid sheen

of light that painted the overhead clouds with crimson and green.

"You know where that cauldron is—where we landed?" Simms demanded.

"Yes. I think so."

We ran on. Our get-away. But a sense of satisfaction was within me. We hadn't killed more than a fraction of the Phorgians who undoubtedly were preparing to invade Earth—but we had certainly put a dent in that invasion. Delayed it for a time without question.

"That's where we left the ship, isn't it?" Simms panted at last.

It seemed that the rim of the cauldron depression was close ahead of us now. And abruptly, to one side a hundred feet away, I saw a moving figure! A Phorgian? My warning hand pulled Simms down to the rocks as I crouched. And then in the silence a voice hailed us.

"You Harper—and Simms—"

It was Grosse! He came bounding at us. He was panting, disheveled, covered with sweat and grime. "What happened?" he gasped. "I thought that you were killed—that fire-explosion. It frightened away my guards and I got loose—ran here—I haf been trying to find our ship."

I think there were quite a few things I would have said to Grosse then. But suddenly Simms whispered: "The Phorgians! Look—after us—"

Behind us, up on a little ridge with the distant glare silhouetting them, the blobs of squat figures were visible. They had discovered us; in another few seconds, a shot from them would come. . .

We ducked and ran, plunging over the rim of the cauldron. The broken little descent was into almost solid blackness. Was our spaceship here? For a moment I could not see it. I wondered vaguely if we had made an error—if this actually was the place, or merely a depression like it.

"This surely is it," Grosse panted. "A little way ahead."

Then we saw the blurred blob of the ship. The figures behind us were already coming down the descent, in the blackness we could not see them, nor could they, probably, see us. But we could hear their jabbering, shouting voices.

Then the dark outlines of the ship were close before us. Its yawning doorway—queer—it seemed larger than it should have been. . . . We plunged over the threshold. But it wasn't our ship!

I was only just vaguely aware of it when in the blackness of a corridor there was the press of a squat body against me. I heard Simms gasp out a curse. Then something struck my head, crashed on my skull; the whole world seemed to split into a blinding roar of light within my head as I fell sliding off into the abyss of unconsciousness.

CHAPTER IV

I CAME TO MYSELF after a nameless interval. It seemed interminable, with my mind drifting into a phantasmagoria of the tumultuous events through which I had passed. Then at last, vaguely I seemed aware that I was lying on something hard. I opened my eyes to a blurred swaying vista of a small metal room; it was dim with starlight, and I knew that I was lying on its floor.

The interior of a spaceship, in flight. As the roaring in my aching head began lessening, I could hear the throb of the vessel's mechanisms, the hiss of the air-circulators. A distant voice sounded, and there seemed the tramp of footsteps passing somewhere near.

I must have stirred, and Simms' anxious voice sounded—I knew that he was here on the floor, sitting beside me.

"You George—at last—all right, now?"

My strength, once I was fully conscious, seemed to come back. Blood, which now had dried, matted my hair, from the blow which had knocked me out. But otherwise, I was uninjured.

Simms and I, momentarily, were alone here in a little cubby of the invaders' spaceship. Perhaps it was the vessel which Dr. Livingston had seen encircling the Earth; and which had gone back for more of its deadly spore-bombs. At all events, despite the set-back we must have given the Phorgian expedition, this ship now was heading for Earth, to distribute more of the deadly fire rain.

"We're nearly a day out from Phorgos," Simms was saying. "Heading for Earth—that's obvious. Crew of eight, with a Commander-pilot. He seems to speak a little English, by the way."

"English?"

"From the father of Grosse—you remember, Dr. Livingston told us."

Grosse! My still-confused mind had not yet thought of him. "Young Grosse? Where is he? What happened to him?"

"That damned so and so." Simms jerked a thumb toward an oval doorway near us. "There he is, if it interests you. He's shown himself up—at last."

My gaze followed his gesture. This was a considerably larger ship than our small vehicle; there was a low vaulted corridor outside our door, through which I could glimpse a portion of the forward, crescent-shaped control turret. A Phorgian sat at the levers—a big fellow, taller, more stalwart than most of them. Lounging beside him was young Grosse, earnestly talking. At intervals the alien would nod and once he laughed.

"Nice, huh?" Simms muttered. "Believe me, if I didn't know they would murder us out of hand, I'd sneak in there and wring that damned Grosse's neck. I could do it, too."

I skipped it; spilt milk is no good to anybody. It was our future now that concerned me—and that certainly looked desperate enough.

"What do they plan to do with us?" I demanded. "You any idea?"

Simms grimaced. "We'll get killed in the end, don't worry. That pilot-leader, whatever they call him—he took a few jibes at me. Seems the idea is—when this ship gets to circling the Earth—dropping their damned fire rain—you and I might be helpful. You know—the geography of Earth—the big cities. An' when they get through with us—" Simms made a nasty gesture across his throat.

"Meanwhile—we've got the run of the ship here?"

"Yes. Pretty much. I've been around a bit. Somebody generally watches, though." Simms shrugged. "After all, what could we do? Can't very well jump off into Space."

"We've got to do something," I said. "Some plan—desperate or not."

FUTILE PLANNING. We were still trying to imagine something when suddenly Grosse came down the corridor. I was on my feet now. As he reached our doorway, stooping, and then standing just inside it, Simms and I silently faced him.

"Well," he said to me with his thick-lipped smile. "So you haf recovered. I'm glad."

"Oh you are," Simms burst out. "To hell with—"

I checked him. "I guess the less we talk the better," I said to Grosse. "If this cubby belongs to us—get out of it, will you?"

His smile faded. He seemed suddenly about to speak, but instead he just stood silently staring at us, facing our contempt. And then he said abruptly,

"We will let it go at that; I will keep away from you."

"You damn better had," Simms flung after him as he left.

And that was that. Grosse seemed glad enough to keep away from us. Simms and I, as a matter of fact, were both pretty much alone in our cubby throughout all the long monotonous voyage—in past the orbit of Mars, until at last we had cut the Moon's orbit and were approaching the Earth. Interminable days. The Phorgian leader had come to us once or twice.

"You no fear me," he told us in slow, heavy broken English. "Be good—you help us—no hurt you then." There was irony in his weird mouthing voice, his gargoyle grimace.

"Fine; that's what we'll do," I agreed.

We were docile enough. Our food—weird food, but we got used to it—was brought to us. Occasionally we roamed around a little. . . .Monotonous voyage. . .But the last third of it wasn't, for now we were tense with eager, desperate anticipation. . .

I hit upon the plan of what we might do—hit upon it quite by chance. I was in the dim starlit corridor, near the control turret at a time when the alien leader and Grosse were there. The Phorgian was explaining to Grosse something of the spore-bombs; I recall I was tense with grim excitement when I got back to Simms.

"That four-foot cylinder in a corner of the turret," I said. "That's one of the bombs—a spare one. The others are racked in the projector pressure-porte."

"And so what?" Simms demanded.

"This one in the control turret—in addition to its firing timer—there's a percussion-detonator. One good shove at the nose of that bomb—"

"I still don't get you."

"If that bomb went off—the expansion of what should be a few square miles of fire rain—all compressed in this ship—what would it do?"

Involuntarily Simms shuddered. "It would scatter the ship and all of us over a few square miles of Space," he retorted.

"Exactly. . .Don't look like that, I'm not

thinking of suicide. But if we threatened to do it—"

THE more we thought of the thing, the more feasible it looked. Feasibility, born of our desperation. Yet — why shouldn't it work? There were sliding doors to the control turret. It would be easy to get in there, at a moment when the alien one was there alone. Frenzied, desperate men, the Phorgians would think us—men ready to carry out their own death unless they could have their way. We could bar ourselves in the turret, control the ship from there, head down to Earth and land. . .

"Why not?" Simms agreed at last. "They couldn't get us out—couldn't balk us—couldn't take the chance but what in a frenzy we'd set off the bomb. . .But what about food in there? And water?"

"We can take a little in with us. We'll try it—when we get down near Earth—a thousand miles out, say. Simms, listen—"

I checked myself abruptly. It seemed that outside in the dark corridor there was a faint footstep. Silently I padded to the door-oval. But there was nothing.

Our time came at last. It was, with our living routine, the middle of the time of sleep. Beneath the spaceship now our familiar Earth was a huge yellow glowing ball occupying half the lower firmament—a ball mottled with the configurations of its clouds through rifts in which the oceans and continents were faintly visible. Tense with expectancy, Simms and I waited in our cubby. Through the partly opened doorway, down the length of dark corridor, we could see that now the alien leader was in the control turret alone.

"Our best chance?" Simms whispered tensely.

"Yes. Let's go—"

Silently we entered the corridor; in the turret, the leader had his back to us. We knew, too, that very probably there was no one else in this part of the ship at the moment. Ten feet along the corridor a door led into a small side pressure porte. The door was open—a small dark oval. I was slightly in advance of Simms, just passing the pressure-porte door, when suddenly a dark figure crouching there rose up.

Grosse! His Earth flash-gun had been given back to him. He had it—and mine, or Simms', one in each hand! The ugly little cone-shaped muzzles were leveled at us. His voice was a low, ironic murmur.

"Whatever you're up to—this is the end of you." In the starlit dimness of the corridor his face was contorted; his deep-set, dark eyes glared at us. "It will be a pleasure—finishing you off—myself."

Irrational? No, it seemed obvious enough. Our silent contempt for his treachery—our refusal to speak to him all these long days and nights—a wild hatred was in him now so that he would murder us out of hand.

"Take it easy," I muttered. "Your leader needs us—"

"He can do without you; get in there." His gun-muzzles shoved us into the black little pressure porte. He was softly chuckling now. "The less you talk to me, the better. You said that; you're right. Well, you won't be here any longer, to talk, or not to talk. Get into those suits."

His foot kicked at two pressure-spacesuits in the darkness. "Into them, I tell you—would you rather die now, or live a little longer, falling through Space?"

I tried to talk to him as we donned the suits, but his low suppressed laugh was wild. "You won't be satellites of this ship; we don't want you hanging around. I'll turn a countergravity ray on you. You'll have a nice, long trip—until you starve to death! What could be nicer for you—falling free through Space, and starving to death!"

With a sudden movement which we had no possible chance to stop, he had jumped back into the corridor and slid the door upon us. Simultaneously the outer door-slide flicked open—a rectangle with the great yawning abyss of the stars out there. The air in the little porte went out into the vacuum of Space with a hissing rush. I grabbed at Simms as we were blown out with it. And I recall that there was just a second when, through my visor pane, I was able to look back. Beyond the pane of the inner door, Grosse's face was staring in at us—his face with a strange expression upon it which I shall never forget. . . .

Then we were hurtling out in the abyss. I was clinging to Simms, our puffed pressure suits jostling against each other. For a moment it was a wild, whirling, swaying, dizzying blur of stars, the huge ball of Earth and the dark outlines of the Phorgian ship, first above us, then below as we hurtled, turning end over end. . . .Falling free. . . .

MY METAL-TIPPED fingers somehow seemed gripping Simms' shoulder.

A metal plate there made audiphone contact. In the weird silence I could hear his hurried breathing. I murmured,

"Tom, you hear me?"

"Oh—yes, George. The end—the end of us, all right."

We seemed steadying a little. The blob of the Phorgian ship was far above us now, dwindling. The Earth-disc was beneath us. Quite evidently we were falling toward the Earth...A fall of fifteen hundred miles... The end of Simms and Harper....

Queer that these alien Space-suits should have an identical type of audiphone contact with those of our Earth design....Instinctively my gloved fingers were fumbling at my bloated waistline....Queer. There were mechanisms at my belt. Familiar mechanisms....Again I murmured,

"Tom, your belt; feel what's at your belt." My voice was a wondering, excited whisper. And his answered me.

"Why—why, good Lord — propulsion mechanisms—"

"And countergravity units—"

These were not Phorgian pressure suits! Everything about them was wholly familiar! They were two of the emergency-escape suits we had had on our own little Space-ship!....The aliens had captured our ship on Phorgos, of course; they had stored our equipment on their own vessel. And the murderous Grosse, in the blackness of that porte, had given us our own suits!

"Tom! Our own mechanisms! We can propel ourselves where we like! And countergravity units to check our fall! We'll land safely!"

He realized it. His old familiar chuckle sounded within my helmet. "That damned Grosse—ironic, eh? A good joke on him—"

WITH A propulsion, antigravity thrust, directed at the dwindling blob of the Phorgian ship now far above us amid the blazing stars, I completely steadied us. At accelerating velocity we were drifting down upon the Earth—safe enough, for we could check our fall at will.

I recall that I was staring up at the dark blot of the now-distant enemy vessel. And suddenly the shape of it burst into a soundless puff of light-fire! An expanding puff, like a bubble of fire breaking outward, scattering!....There was just a moment of glaring, bursting flame; then the enemy ship and everything in it were scattering over miles of the abyss!

Then the soundless glare vanished and there was nothing!....Nothing at all up there to mark where the diabolical enemy ship had been!

Grosse! For a moment Simms and I stared numbed—and then we understood so clearly! Grosse, who had been worming his way into the confidence of the invaders. Making himself our enemy, which tricked them still further while he sought a way to destroy them! Doubtless he had overheard our own desperate scheme to try to bluff them with the giant spore-bomb. And he had chosen the surer course—had thrust us to safety and gone to his own death with the enemy!

WE LANDED safely upon the Earth; landed on a mid-western plain in the Province of Kansas. It was night; and within a few hours we were in Dr. Livingston's laboratory, telling him what had happened to us—and telling what had happened to Grosse. He listened quietly, grimly, and then he gravely nodded.

"Yes, that would be his way. Always a silent, uncommunicative fellow—"

The damage Simms and I had done to the invaders—and Grosse's destruction of their raiding vessel—had given the Earth now a temporary little respite. But the onslaught would come; we knew that. And feverishly the authorities in Washington and Great-London were trying to prepare for it. Beside us on the table here, Dr. Livingston's public-news telecast screen was glowing with a swift sequence of news-scenes from all over the world. The telecaster's droning voice, turned low, was audible to us as he talked.

"I was wondering," I said suddenly. "Dr. Livingston, when we first landed upon Phorgos, Grosse seemed to be doing something very queer—"

I told Dr. Livingston how several times Grosse had seemed to stoop, planting something in the rocky ground.

Livingston smiled grimly. "He and I worked that out—just a chance, I don't know—yet. You see, Grosse's father—when he came back from Phorgos—brought samples of the rock. He had a theory of its weird nature; I experimented. I tried to secure certain catalysts, in the presence of which a weird chemical reaction would undoubtedly take place."

"In the soil of Phorgos?" I said.

"Exactly. An ultra-swift oxidation—high-

ly communicable from one molecule of the Phorgos rock to another. A train of gunpowder communicates its oxidation very swiftly—a reaction of that nature—"

"And Grosse was—"

"Planting my devised chemicals, and catalysts. Tiny time-incendiaries, you might call them. An elapsed time—and then a tiny bursting fire. Not an ordinary conflagration—an ultra-rapid oxidation, which in the presence of those catalysts—well, it's just a chance, but Grosse and I hoped—"

The telecaster's droning voice, suddenly urgent, checked Dr. Livingston.

"What in the devil—" Simms muttered.

The three of us sat tense, listening. "From Federal Observatories—the Jovian Moon—Phorgos—"

With his urgent voice, the routine image on the news-grid melted away. In its place instantly came the image of Phorgos as now it showed through the great electro-refractor of the Federal Observatory. We stared silent, breathless. A small, dark, round ball, with its limb of jagged mountains illumined by the light from Jupiter. Dark, round ball—that enemy world. But already there was a dot of light on it. Swiftly spreading dot, red-yellow, shot with green!

A monstrous, spreading flame of light... Ultra-swift oxidation—the expanding, flaming puff—like the burning of gunpowder. ....It was so swift that all in those breathless seconds there was before us on the news-grid a flaming little Sun....a ball of fire with leaping streamers of flame licking upward into the darkness of Space....

The end of Phorgos! The end of the menace! A new little flaming Sun up there, so swiftly consuming itself! Monstrous funeral pyre for our diabolic enemy!

THE END

No, mister, this house has never been renovated and I guess it never will — it'll stand as long as the country stands, too, because, you see

WASHINGTON SLEPT HERE

WHEN I walked into the office that morning, Gus Heller, the owner of the New Life Realty Corporation, was sitting at his desk, as usual, his feet planted solidly on top, and smoking a big cigar. The phone bell shrilled as I slammed the door behind me.

"C'mere, Hank," barked Gus, snapping a suspender and crooking a finger at me with the other hand.

"Just a minute, boss, the phone's ringing. Good morning, Sylvia." I scaled my hat to a peg on the wall above my own desk, nodded pleasantly to Miss Bernstein and grabbed the phone.

"Hello. Yes, this is the extermination department— what's that? Roaches? Any bedbugs? Oh, no bedbugs. Silverfish. Wait a minute, please, I'll refer you to the complaint department."

I switched the call to our stenographer's desk and turned my attention to Gus. Miss Bernstein's voice closed in behind me, buzzing away. She was thirty-five, unmarried looked it, and was getting away from the blissful state at the rate of thirty seconds to the minute.

"Well, what is it. I've got some mail..."

"Read this." He reached into a drawer, brought out an envelope and handed it to me. Then he popped his cigar into an ash tray. I could tell by such signs and portents that the boss was in a bad humor that morning. It remained to discover whether it was his mother-in-law or a bit too much salami-on-rye of which he was overfond.

It was a famous spot, this house. Here had General Washington slept the night before the battle of Long Island, when the Continental troops first clashed with the King's Regulars. Only the plaque said that the house had been built of "sturdy American wood," while anyone could see that it was stone. And there was something unhealthy about it. . .

I took the letter out of the envelope and cast my eye down the sheet. The handwriting was very bad, crabbed, as a writer would say, (even if it wasn't) and looked more like hen scratches or frog furrows. This is what it read:

Mister Gus Heller
3012 Worth Street
Manhattan
Dere sir,

My husbin says not to rite you, but I got to if we are going to get anythin settled. Since two months, weve had tree dets in the house and it is gettin awful hard to rent a room ennymore. Last nite, Mr. Hardy on the tird floor back died and the poleece says it was heart faileure. They said the same thing about the other peeple who died. The poleece has been askin me questions all nite and my husbin is gettin pritty tired of it. He dunt like the way peeple are dyin and the way they died and he dunt like the way people keep disapirin and leavin there bags and stuff behint. The naybors are start in to talk and its getting awful hard to rent enny rooms (here the handwriting changed its style abruptly). Listen, Mr Keller, I tuld my wife not to rite you but since she did, I suppose its al right. Ennyway, somepin has got to be done. Tree peeple died funny here, even if the poleece said it was heart faileure. They all had damn funny looks on their faces when they died, like they was seein a ghost. And the peeple who keep rentin rooms and goin away without enny one seenin em and leavin there bag behint aint doin business enny

by HUGH RAYMOND

(Illustrated by John B. Musacchia.)

good atall. The naybors is talkin. Please do somepin, please. O, we will sent you the monthly rent in the morning.

signed,
Thomas Higgins, super.
Macushla Higgins

I FOLDED the sheet, evidently torn from a child's school book, glanced at the return address and then handed it back to Gus.

"Flatbush, eh? We haven't had any trouble out there for months."

"Kelly, I've been gettin' letters like that for almost eight months now." He replaced the smoldering cigar in his mouth, "I haven't said anything or showed you any of 'em until now because I was sorta ashamed to. This," he indicated the letter and pushed the derby hat he was wearing back over his forehead, "is kinda the last straw. It's gettin' serious. We're losin' money right and left. Our tenants mostly die—or don't stay long enough to pay anything."

"Looks strictly in the line of everyday dying to me," I said firmly. "Higgins said in the letter that the police were satisfied the deaths were simple heart stoppage. After all, Gus, Murder Inc, is in the clink. Fergoshsakes, people die and disappear every day. Why, according to the paper this morning, three thousand people disappeared in this city alone last night. It's common enough. . . ."

He fixed me with a half closed eye.

"Our firm accounted for about a hundred and sixty seven of the three thousand that vanished. They disappeared out of houses we owned. I got a stack of letters sayin' so."

I gritted my teeth.

"No wonder!" I yelled. "Who wouldn't scram out of old dumps like the ones we've got. Who was it started buying up those old shacks in the city and rehabilitating 'em for rooming houses? You did. My idea was to build new ones and then...."

He shut me up with a hard look, got up out of his seat and hobbled to the nearest wall. "Here," he barked, indicating a huge map of the city he'd got out of some five and dimery, "is where the houses are."

I got up close to the map and peered. A lot of tiny red circles had been pencilled in around certain locations in the city. Most of them were ancient and decrepit. For that matter, so were most of our houses.

"Well?"

"I dunno. I dunno what to think. We ain't breakin' any laws. Everythin' legal and above board. But I don't like the way people keep dying and disappearin' in our houses."

"Maybe I'm not doing my job," I said sarcastically. "Maybe I'm so cruel that the bed bugs and cockroaches are working overtime to make people feel so bad that they die or go away in a frenzy and never come back. Maybe...."

"Forget it, son." He sat down abruptly and twirled the end of his cigar in the ashtray for a minute or so.

"Well?" I repeated. "I've got to get back to the morning mail."

"Drop it," he said. "You're goin' out to Flatbush."

"What for? Do I look like a blooming detective? Gus, just because I'm related to half the Brooklyn police force because my wife's a Flanagin, that's no reason. . ."

"I'm not askin' you to be a flatfoot—at least no flatter a foot than you are now. I'm askin' you to go out and take a look at this place because you've got imagination. Anyway, I want to find out what's goin' on and I don't want to get the police startin' more investigations. We'd be rooned. We need imagination." He lingered over the last word. "Let those orders go until tomorrow. A couple million cockroaches will be grateful if you let 'em live a few days longer."

"Syliva. . ." I whirled, my face a mask of sarcasm, "this mental giant...." but the lady wasn't there. She'd gone outside, to the powder room as she called it.

I took the subway.

FLATBUSH is a neighborly part of town. Because of the influence of the movies, it is the best known section of the best known borough of the best known city in the world. Yet, many people have a mistaken conception of Flatbush. It finds its duplicate in many another place throughout the country, sprawling, suburban areas where poverty is not so obvious because the entire area is genteelly poor or lower middle class and where the best homes are two story, seven and nine room cottages with oil heating and at least three kids scarring the woodwork.

Flatbush is the home of the comic character Major Hoople and you probably know what that means.

The section was originally settled by the Dutch, although it is practically impossible to detect the flavor any longer. There is a Dutch Reformed Church in the very heart of the old settlement and surrounding it, down streets and avenues for almost a mile on all sides are the pathetic remains of big old homes, magnificant and expansive in their day, but now dedicated mainly to the purposes of New Life Realty which has converted many of them into rooming houses of (I confess) somewhat doubtful quality.

The address on the agony letter was on Martense Street, between Bedford and Flatbush. I'd seen the house before. It was a fairly modern structure for one of our places, which is to say that it wasn't much over a hundred and seventy years of age, brick, dun colored and two and a half stories high, the half story being characteristic of a certain type of old Dutch architecture.

"Mrs. Higgins?" I asked anxiously as the door opened slightly after I'd rung the bell and regretted instantly that I had failed to identify the sex of the body behind it. A large, amorphous and terribly weatherbeaten male face poked out from behind the jamb and looked at me balefully which is a mild description of the real thing.

"Sure and I'm not missus Higgins," he said in a broken down brogue which plainly indicated his origin in Brooklyn's Irish colony far downtown. "I'm misther Hig-

gins." Then he caught sight of my face. Ye're a doctor—maybe a detective?"

"I'm from the New Life Realty Corporation." I said hastily and took off my hat. "We're the people who employ you. You're—you're not the same man we had here before—when I was here before, I mean."

"We're not hivy drinkers," the door opened wider and his immense bony frame, attired in dirty overalls come into full view. "The MacPhersons who were here before us carried on sonthin' scandalous..."

"Yes, yes," I began and was about to push my way past him when a woman, apparently Macushla Higgins, his wife, appeared behind him out of the dark, deep hallways. Her face was florid, full of wrinkles and folds of fat. She had small piggish eyes and blinked them constantly. A filthy apron girded her ample figure.

"What's he want?" she mumbled to her husband.

I IMMEDIATELY hastened to reidentify myself, deciding that the superintendent would do a bad job of it.

"You—ah—sent us a letter as of this morning. Someone died, I believe. The last of a long—uh—line."

Mr. and Mrs. Higgins parted as if by magic. She made a sort of clutching gesture at her throat.

"He's upstairs. They came and embalmed him last night. Doctor Throne got them in. He's takin' care of the body."

She beckoned me forward. Two steps inside and the brilliant light of the July sun was suddenly lost in the dingy gloom of the hall way. They led me up a rickety flight of stairs, then up another and another and finally I was pushed down a corridor. My hosts stopped at last before a door from which the paint had already entirely peeled. A pathetic rose, wilted in the summer heat was tacked to the jamb. This, I was informed, was the Christian work of Mrs. Higgins.

Mr. Higgins, ostensibly out of respect, but probably more out of a superstitious fear, remained behind as we entered. His wife pushed a pudgy finger toward a bed lying near a shaded window.

"That's him," she said in a strangled sort of voice and again clutched her throat, very obviously swooning in delight at the situation. She glanced back contemptuously at her husband who was lurking in the door way.

I approached the rickety old brass bed and glanced down at the body.

God, what a face! The embalmers had obviously been at work because the room smelled faintly of the formaldehyde and other ingredients they put in their private recipes, but they had failed entirely to straighten out the features of the dead man.

It was a small bulk, that body, dressed in a shoddy business suit, evidently his best. The body itself was composed, relaxed. The hands lay quietly folded on the breast.

I've seen looks like that one before. On the face of a boy who had plummeted off the Palisades. On the faces of women who faint slowly and think they are dying. More especially, I've seen it on the faces of people choked to death brutally. But there was no sign of violence on the man before me. The embalmers must have tried to fix that face but the muscles couldn't be gotten at in the short time they'd had to work in. A job like that would have taken time—and money.

"Nice—eh?" I whirled, gripping my hat very tightly.

A bearded man, short, stocky, with skin as pale as a sheet and dressed in an old lounging robe over patched trousers walked into the room. His beady eyes lit up as he advanced, hand outstretched.

"My name's Throne, Ford. Doctor Ford Throne." He lit a cigarette nervously as I let go of his hand and explained who I was.

"Yes, I helped the police when they came, like I helped them the two times before. They called it heart failure. So it was. So it was." He dragged out the last three words. With his nervous hands he dragged a limp chair toward him and sat down.

"Leave us alone, Mrs. Higgins," he said suddenly, looking up at her, commandingly. The superintendent's wife who had been hovering close, seemed to bridle but there was no outburst. Instead, she nodded very humbly and waddled toward the door, closing it very quietly behind her. The mingled voices of Thomas and Macushla Higgins cadenced down the hall.

"You're a doctor," I said, needlessly.

"Retired," he answered, somewhat wearily. "I suppose you people at—New Life did you say it was?" I nodded, "are worried about these deaths." I nodded again.

"Well," he continued, "outside of the fact that there have been a lot of them—and some disappearances besides—which the police don't know about because the good Higginses have failed to inform them, there's nothing really much out of the ordinary about it." He took several drags on his cigarette, pausing. When he spoke again it was eagerly. "This fellow died hard, apparently, but he died of heart failure, nothing else. I knew he had a bad heart, Mr. Kelly. All the roomers in this house come to me about their ailments when they find out I'm a doctor and sometimes I tell 'em what's wrong. Homer Hardy—that's his name—had a very bad heart. Anything might have set him off, a bad dream, the fear of returning to his wife. O, he was a wife-deserter. Used to live in Cleveland. Ran away from his wife there."

I ignored the confidence.

"You seem to have been taking charge of the funeral affairs," I said.

He wagged his head.

"It's the least I could do. Those two—" he indicated the late occupants of the room with a look of disgust through the door—"wouldn't have known what to do. I looked through Homer's papers and cabled his brother in Cleveland. He sent a money order by return."

"Then," I began, "that's settled."

"Say," he stood up hurriedly, "how about a drink in my room. No use sending you away without some little memento of your house," he grinned.

I hesitated for a minute, then finally signified assent by nodding my head. I have never been known consciously to refuse a drink.

AS WE were walking out the door, my eye was caught suddenly by a plaque fixed to the wall to one side of the door with heavy bolts evidently sunk deep in some strong bracing member behind the plaster. An American eagle, defiant, rampant, circling a graven head of George Washington took my attention. Curiously, I stepped closer and while Throne waited in the doorway, I read the small lettering, cut shallowly in the metal. It read:

ON THE NIGHT OF (the date had been blotted out) GEORGE WASHINGTON, COMMANDER IN CHIEF OF THE CONTINENTAL ARMY SLEPT IN THIS ROOM BEFORE THE BATTLE OF LONG ISLAND. WE, LOYAL AMERICANS, ERECT THIS PLAQUE IN THIS STURDY AMERICAN HOUSE OF AMERICAN WOOD TO THE MEMORY OF THE GREATEST AMERICAN.

The metal plate was signed with the name Van Moederen.

Throne grunted.

"Too bad you read that," he lamented, mockingly. "You people'll probably go and raise the rent now."

His room on the floor above was large, bright and sunshiny and filled with plants. The herbiage might have been cheery, except that they were all Venus fly traps and cobra plants.

"Interesting little devils, aren't they?" he grinned, handing me a stiff drink of Scotch he'd been busy pouring as I looked them over.

"I've seen some at the Prospect Park Botanical Gardens," I said, interestedly and suddenly staggered. "Eh?" I said weakly, leaning against an old bureau and setting the whiskey down hastily, "I'm as dizzy as a blonde."

Throne leaped to my side.

"Sit down here," he said and led me to a chair. "It's quite alright. You're not sick. You're just drunk."

"What?"

He laughed a little.

"The air in this house, for some reason is very rich in oxygen. I know. I've tested it."

"Where does it come from, pipes?" My head had stopped its swimming and I reached for the whiskey.

"That I don't know. There aren't any pipes other than the usual ones passing under the house and even if one carried oxygen, whoever owned it would have fixed the lid. I don't mind it much. Makes me feel good. Other people don't like it so much. My pets like it, I think." He nodded his head toward the plants that circled the room, set in clay pots. "Makes 'em feel as though their output is better every day." He laughed again and downed his drink. "Have another?" He asked.

I acquiesed and got up, by this time having rather forgotten my mission and the body downstairs. I approached one of the plants and gazed down at its spiked hood. He noticed my curiosity and immediately bagged a fly in the room with the aid of a small net.

"I keep this for my pets," he said. "They get hungry, sometimes, when they can't

catch enough to eat. In summer time, like now, they gorge." He extracted the struggling insect expertly from the net and crippling its wings slightly dropped it into the mouth of the plant. Presently the hood began to close. I watched it narrowly.

"It takes some time, of course. About an hour. When they open up again, the fly is generally mostly digested. The plant eats 'em."

"Are they dangerous to human life?" I asked curiously, fingering one of the leaves of the feeding plant.

HE LIT a cigarette.

"Not in the least bit. They would be, of course if they were bigger, but no known variety is any larger than that one you're touching. One curious thing about them, a phenomenon I've observed in species I've bred myself, is their ability to change shape and color as if they sensed that their prey was on to their tricks and they were trying to fool it. From the aesthetic viewpoint, Mr. Kelly, my plants are very beautiful. The flies and spiders they catch probably don't think so, but I do. Why, sometimes I think they are almost alive—really alive, I mean, not just instinctively. I've woken and seen them stretching their leaves and hoods to the faint light of the dawn, twisting and writhing in some of the strangest shapes you ever seen. You know Mr. Kelly, I have some theories about those plants. I...."

I interrupted the discussion, fearing he would go on forever. Gus was waiting at the office.

"I'm afraid they'll give me some bad dreams," I said jocosely, picking up my hat.

His eyes narrowed and twitched a bit and the fingers holding the smoldering cigarette shook.

"They give me bad dreams, sometimes. Sometimes," he glanced up musing at the walls, "I think they know where they are. There have been nights when I've awakened and thought I heard them talking...." he stopped abruptly, acutely aware that he was speaking like a man who is a fit candidate for the nearest asylum—in this case, Kings County, not many blocks away.

"I'm sorry," he said, abashed. "I shouldn't have talked like that....still," he paused and glanced furtively about. "There are some strange things about this room, Mr. Kelly. There are some strange things about this house...."

There's little doubt that as a detective I'd make a good plumber. Just as he was about to expound on the very things I was here to find out about, I went away, but quick. And if you want to know why, I was scared, clear down to my corns. I left him standing quietly in his room.

I didn't go back to the office but went to my favorite bar, phoned Gus I'd be in in the morning and got a little tipsy. We Irish have an intimate and spiritual acquaintance with death. I suppose I was afraid I'd have been hearing the old Kelly family banshee wailing next.

HELLER was talking on the phone when I came in the next day, a half hour late. Something was wrong. I detected that instantly, because mousy Miss Bernstein was sitting rigidly in her chair listening to the boss's voice speaking to someone on the other end of the wire.

Gus' face was a definite shade of white. At any rate, there was damn little blood left in it. When he finished talking, he set the receiver down deliberately and picked up his cigar with shaking hands.

"That was Captain Geoghan out in Flatbush," he began. Abruptly my heart did a few flipflops. "A Doctor Throne died last night at you know what address." There was a second during which I thought my heart stopped, then it began thumping very heavily.

"Was it—was—was it murder?" I asked weakly and he nodded. I looked at Sylvia but she was looking straight at Heller. Then I sat down.

Gus relit his cigar with a trembling hand.

"Murdered bad," he continued. "They found him in bed cut up. Chewed, I mean. His legs seemed to have been eaten off and the top of his head was gone."

"What about Mrs. Higgins?" I grasped desperately at some scrap of humor in the situation.

"They've got her at the County. She's hysterical. Her old man's off his nut completely. Claims he heard Throne screaming something all night. Something like as if the house was falling down on him or the room was caving in. Grrrrrrr," he growled. "That brick white elephant is costing us more money than it's worth."

"Brick?" I pricked up my ears. "That house isn't brick; it's wood. There's a plaque dedicated to George Washington in

Hardy's room which says its wood." I quoted the dedication.

"Go on, it's brick," he jeered. "I ought to know. I bought the joint."

I suddenly realized that he was right. The house was brick. I'd noticed that as I walked up to it and then completely forgot it.

For some reason my heart started to pound even more heavily. I felt suddenly weaker and weary. I got up and put on my hat.

"Where you goin'?" asked Gus. "I'll need you here this afternoon on that Clagget business. He's buyin' some more land out around the Brooklyn Iron and Kettle Works. Some of our houses are on it."

"I'll be back in an hour," I replied. "Miss Bernstein, stick by that phone. I have a feeling I'll be on the other end in a little while. I'm going over to Borough Hall—to the Hall of Records."

THEY were very courteous to me when I asked for the information on the Van Moederen. I'd known of course that all houses built in the city are registered and their plans submitted and filed. It had been more crudely done in the older days, but it had been done. At least, I hoped so. I heaved a sigh of relief when they came back with the stuff, but a chill went through me when I read distinctly that the original Van Moederen house had been built of wood.

I asked the clerk if there was any record of the house having been torn down and replaced, or even renovated. He shook his head doubtfully, peered over the dusty old records again and pursed his lips.

"Nope," he said finally. "The Van Moederen house has never been touched, according to these files except ones in—uh" he raised the sheets to the light, "1903 when they were laying some electrical conduits in Martense Street and they had to excavate under part of the foundation. See, here's the engineer's note." He paused and indicated some closely written words on the blueprint sheets. Then he picked up the older, original plan, drawn on crumbly brown paper and put it back in the folder.

I told him I'd be back, went out and phoned Miss Bernstein and got a few more addresses, mainly of the houses which Gus had circled in red on the map. Picking out the ones described on our deed papers as brick, I put the clerk to work again. He was very helpful about it and cheerfully reported that the houses were wood, had never been touched except for minor repairs plainly indicated on the sheets.

Feeling as cold as ice, I looked at him weakly. "But they're not wood, they're brick. Our deeds say they're brick." Hesitatingly I pushed my list of addresses toward him.

He fixed me with a disbelieving eye, smacked his lips loudly, reached nonchalently into a pocket for a stick of gum and filled his mouth.

"Nope," he said, confidently. "The records don't lie. Looks like your firm's been sold a phoney bill of goods, mister. Better have the housing commission look it up," then as I was about to protest further, he blinked again. "Noo Yawk records never lie."

I staggered out into the street, oblivious of the roar of the elevated train, the clash and clatter of street traffic. Picking my way up Court St. I bumped into numerous pedestrians. Dazed, a swirling fog numbing my brain I broached no excuses.

THE horror grew on me as I stumbled through Brooklyn Heights, staring terrified at the old houses lining both sides of the short, narrow and crooked lanes.

Houses? Brick? Wood? Whose voice broke over me, mumbling, growing to a mighty crescendo? Throne's?

Throne was dead, eaten. Eaten by what? Already an answer was waiting, half-formed in my brain. I suddenly stopped, clutched my throat and almost choked. What was it Throne had said about those damnable Venus fly traps, that some species adapted themselves for new victims, changing their shapes and appearances in order to ensnare gullible flies wary of their old appearance.

I steadied myself on a bent and rusty lamp post. Throne, I told myself, had never been killed by his little pets. They were too small, too helpless. Bigger game needed bigger killers.

Beyond me, a short distance away loomed the Brooklyn Bridge. Around it, clustering thickly in dark brown masses were the sooty dwellings of two centuries past, huddled together in squalid self-protection against the encroaching steel and concrete factories and apartment buildings. As I stared, my eyes watering, those wretched

hovels took on the appearance of dank, loathsome toadstools, filled with an evil life, brooding, waiting. . .

Then I saw Throne's room and Throne on his bed and the walls of the old house buckling, caving in, drawing closer to his sleeping body, hungry, impatient for food.

Unable any longer to even absorb sensations, I found my way blindly at last to a telephone pay station in a small drug store near the subway, got Gus on the wire and talked hysterically for about a half hour. He shouted back at me every few minutes but I gave him no respite. I babbled on, ending with the shrieked statement that I was drunk, had been drunk the night before and was going to get plastered again. Finally he told me to go to hell. I slammed down the receiver, staggered out into the street and headed for the nearest dive.

Two days later I had recovered sufficiently from a thirty-hour bat to go down to the office. I dropped in to find a new boss behind Heller's old desk. Gus, it appeared, had sold the business and left for Cleveland. Cleveland? I tried to hold down the sudden retch that billowed my stomach. Homer Hardy had come from Cleveland. Why remind me of it? Couldn't he just as well have gone to Kalamazoo, Michigan.

Miss Bernstein returned to my desk after a while. She had an easy, nonchalant expression on her face. It didn't take me long to guess that the new boss had made her deliriously happy by making a few passes. Then, very gently and with considerable tact I was introduced to the head man.

Sometimes I feel queazy about the whole business, especially when I have to go out to Flatbush to lay a horde of bedbugs or silverfish and more especially when the house they're making hideous is old. Sometimes I tell myself I'm nuts, batty as one of my cockroaches and a fit companion for poor Mrs. Higgins playing marbles on the backyard lawn of the Kings County bug house. But there is always a wee drappee or two in a convenient bar to drown the memories that arise when I sit at my desk making out reports and raise my eyes suddenly to find them fixed on Gus' old map with its pencilled circles making a red nosegay around New York and remember that I got drunk once on a lot of oxygen at the old Van Moederen house. House?

Plants, I remember, too, give out oxygen.

TIME EXPOSURE

by E. A. GROSSER

(Author of "Out of Nowhere," "The Radiant Avenger," etc.)

Illustration by Forte

BLAKE, going off watch, glanced at the screen, then stared. Gargan, his relief, saw it the same instant. The screen was a sheet of light. The stars which had always been brilliant points, had become streamers.

"Captain!" Gargan called.

Captain Benson was with them in a split-second, shouldering Blake aside. For hours the captain had been as nervous as a cat listening to a rat in a wall.

And Blake didn't blame him. He faded back out of the way and watched, feeling strangely chilled and hollow in the face of the unknown. It wasn't a pleasant job to carry a flock of scientists into interstellar space in an effort to discover why two previous ships had vanished on the long way to Alpha Centauri.

Of course, there had been others before that. There was the *Firebird,* a technically unsound rocket expedition of a bunch of goofy refugees fleeing the Earth. And there had been various notoriety seekers. But none of them had possessed the new Hsuing Drivers that were supposed to open up the universe to man.

Only the *Atlas,* the *Persephone* and now, the *Rigel,* had possessed them. And they had been swallowed by the silence between the stars, unseen and unreported.

The humming of the Hsuing Drivers faded to an unaccustomed silence as Gargan relayed the captain's quick orders to the power room. And Captain Benson was at the communication board himself, calling Sunderland, the chief of the crew of scientists in the observatory. But he was getting no answer.

"Sunderland!" he barked angrily, face reddening.

"What do you want?" the phone barked back.

"This must be the factor. Any instructions?"

There was a moment's hesitation, then: "You've already cut the drivers?"

"Yes."

"Good. That's all we can do now. But I'm afraid we were too slow. The damage is already done."

The phone went dead and Captain Benson stared at the panel for a long minute. Then he turned slowly, face gray. He saw Blake. And his sagging muscles became firm as he slipped back into routine discipline.

"Well?" he asked.

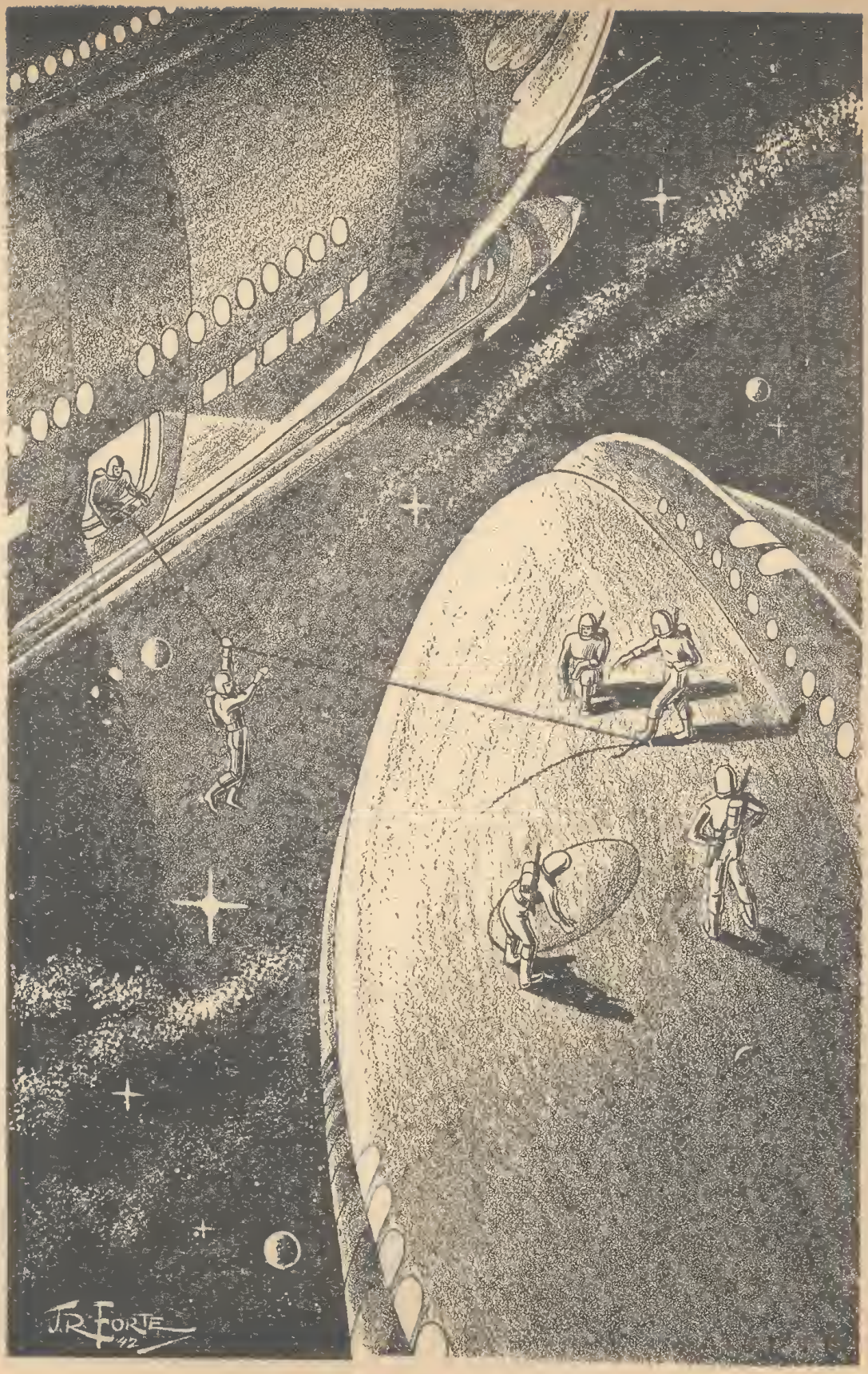
Blake turned without a word and went down the control room companionway. It was contrary to rules to linger when you had been relieved of duty.

HE WENT to his cabin to clean up and get cigarets, and all the while he was remembering how the stars had suddenly blossomed into a blaze of light....like the grand finale of a fireworks celebration. Like the one which had speeded them and the *Rigel* on the hazardous investigation.

Snatches of conversation floated through his mind like voices out of the past: "Don't go, Tim! Don't!" That had been his mother. "I'm afraid it'll be like death, son," the echo of his father's voice said. "Those who know, don't tell; and those who tell, don't know. That factor will never be conquered. The good Lord didn't intend for man to conquer the stars."

"They said that about the planets, too." His own answer to his father. "And, besides, Jane is going."

The explanation was simple. The Lorentz-Fitzgerald Effect, which had always been considered a contraction, was an expansion from the victim's point of view. They were spread out over about five hundred thousand years!



The others followed along the cable.

The argument had ended there. They well knew how he felt about Jane Sunderland who had come as her father's secretary. And when he had found out that O'Farrel and Jane Sunderland had volunteered, nothing on Earth could have kept him off the *Rigel*.

It was odd how one woman could lead two grown men to what was as final as death itself. Or, maybe, it *was* death! Maybe he was dead now, and didn't know it.

He chuckled. He felt quite lively, was looking forward eagerly to the regular meeting in the library.

Blake halted in the library door. O'Farrel's lean length was already sprawled in one of the most comfortable chairs. The tall man looked up with an expectant smile, then the smile faded quickly.

"It would be *you*," O'Farrel said bitterly.

Blake grinned at the other's ill humor, and saw a couple of the crew members clustered around the tables stifle smiles. Evidently the rivalry was no secret. He sat down beside O'Farrel with a sigh of content.

"You must have been waiting for quite a while," he said cheerfully. "Too bad. Didn't you know I told Jane I'd be late."

O'Farrel's head jerked up with quick suspicion, then he smiled and reddened.

"You're a liar. You were just a bit smarter than I was, and figured that her old man would be keeping her pretty busy."

The men at the tables had ceased playing cards. They had been whispering. Finally one turned and asked:

"Beg pardon, sir. But can you tell us what has happened?"

Blake shook his head. 'I probably don't know as much about it as you do. I was going off duty when it happened."

The questioner's smile faded away. "Thanks," he grunted.

Blake watched him. The fellow was big. Broad shoulders swelled the tunic to bursting. And he was one of the best of the crew. But Blake knew that Calloway thought he was lying. Sunderland and the Captain would have to come through with something definite pretty soon, or there would be trouble.

As though in answer to the thought, a clear voice spoke from the doorway.

"Call for assembly. Then you'll know as much as we do."

Jane Sunderland stepped into the room, smiling. And the relieved men drifted out, singly and in twos and threes. O'Farrel and Blake rose to follow, regretfully because Jane evidently intended to remain. She included them both in a smile that lighted up her blue eyes to a nice contrast with her dark hair.

"This assembly is Dad's," she informed. "So it isn't an order. And I could tell you what he's going to say."

They promptly sat down again. She fumbled nervously with a roll of heavy paper while they waited.

"What is it, Jane?" O'Farrel prompted.

"We thought we had the Lorentz-Fitzgerald Effects licked with the new Hsuing Drivers. They act on every atom within their field and it should have been as though we had created a special little space-time for ourselves."

"And it didn't," said Blake. It wasn't even a question.

"No," she agreed with a slight smile. "All it did was to add a few new confusing factors."

"A few? One was bad enough."

"We've found that one."

"And hit the jackpot for a dozen," offered Blake. "Is that it?"

"Right," she said. "The Lorentz-Fitzgerald Effect has always been considered a contraction—and it is, from an outsider's point of view. But from the effectee's point of view, it is an expansion—in time! We are all spread out over about five hundred thousand years."

"Time? But that's impossible!" Blake objected.

"Why? Time can be considered the fourth dimension, and generally is. A two-dimensional being speeding over a curved plane surface would eventually reach a stage where inertia would lift him above the plane surface and into the third. He would seem to disappear to other two-dimensional beings. We've done about the same thing on a higher energy level—the three-dimensional level."

BLAKE was sure that there was a flaw in her words, somewhere. It sounded reasonable, so it couldn't be. Nothing about time was reasonable.

She saw his doubt and watched him.

"I can't see time that way," he objected.

"Tell me how you see it then," she dared.

He hesitated, started to speak, then halted. He'd really let himself in for a job. What in the devil *was* time?

"It's....uh....the basic quality of matter that....Well, it—"

O'Farrel snorted derisively. "What he's trying to say is that old saw: Time is what makes today yesterday tomorrow. Go on, Jane. Don't mind him. He's an awful nuisance when he tries to think."

"But it's better to try and—"

"And that's about as clear as anything," Jane interrupted hastily. "For us, today, yesterday and tomorrow are all *now*."

"We're still living," argued Blake, unwilling to let well enough alone. "And it takes time to live."

"I told you we'd moved up to a higher energy level," Jane said impatiently. "As you say, we're still living—" But she said it as though she doubted that all of those present, were. "—so that proves the existance of a supra-time."

Even O'Farrel was looking doubtful. Jane's cheeks were flushed and her breathing quickened with anger. She stepped to one of the tables and unrolled the paper she had brought.

"Look," she commanded.

It was a photograph, showing the stars as streaks of light as Blake had glimpsed on the screen when going off duty.

"Looks like a time exposure," he offered.

Jane looked startled. "In a way, it is," she admitted. She placed her fingertip on one of the streaks. "This is the sun over a period of nearly a half million years. Dad took several dozen exposures, trying to cut down the length of this line—but it was useless.

"We are outside time—observers! We are seeing the whole instantaneously."

"What a world Earth must be, if we could only see it. Think of seeing it in all four dimensions—seeing the future."

"We're going to," she informed quietly. "We're going back. We have to."

"Have to?" O'Farrel repeated. "Why?"

"See this." Her fingertip was on one end of the Sun-track. "This is our time—the time we lifted out of the ordinary universe."

Then her finger traced the line through a scant fractional inch to where the line became a great white bead. After that, it diminished slowly to a faint white streamer.

They stared, comprehending slowly. It seemed unreal. It was Blake who spoke first.

"Nova?" he asked huskily.

She nodded. "We've got to find some way of getting back, or at least, of warning the world. Maybe a few can be saved."

In the silence they heard the rising hum of the Drivers, and knew that they were already on the way back. There was no strain. They were not even conscious of motion. There was only the humming of the Hsuing Drivers, acting on every atom within their field, to tell them that they were speeding back to the doomed system.

BLAKE, in charge of a landing detail, stepped out of the lock and onto Lagarda Field, then ducked. A short distance away a ship was either landing or taking off and a great sheet of flame extended from its rockets.

But the ship was motionless, and so was the sheet of flame.

O'Farrel, who had chiseled into his detail, grinned inside the helmet of his space suit and swept his gloved hand through the flame.

"No heat," he said mockingly. "And you oughta be damned glad of it. If there was, you and a few cubic feet of plain air would be occupying the same place at the same time. Be kind of messy, I think."

Blake wanted to kick himself. He should have known. The stop at Pluto had showed them that. But who in the red hades could get used to this queerness?

Look around, and everything and everybody was motionless. Those men in front of the hangars didn't move. Some were balanced precariously on one foot, but they didn't fall.

Then look *along* time, through time, and you saw their movement. It was like seeing an infinity of three-dimensional pictures, each motionless yet directly related to those before and after.

His suit-phone brought him a low, rumbling noise. For a moment he was puzzled, then realized that O'Farrel was humming a bit from an old song, *"In the middle of a moment—"*

"Cut it out!" he ordered. "It's bad enough without you playing the fool."

"Be nice," O'Farrel threatened, "or I'll go back and spend my time talking with Jane. I might be able to cut your throat."

"Her old man's got her busy, and you knew that before you came."

They went first to the men in front of the hangars. Blake reached out tentatively and touched one of them. His hand went right into the man's shoulder.

"You'd make a wonderful surgeon," cracked O'Farrel, and Blake wondered at the possibilities of a timeless murder.

They had a job to do—a big one. They must communicate with the world, tell of the fiery destruction to come. And to the normal world they were invisible, impalpable as ghosts.

The magnitude of the task suddenly appalled him. He glanced into the future, and through the years he could see the glare of Nova Sol.

He tried writing on a sheet of paper he had brought with him. But it didn't slip into the future when he placed it in the hand of the nearest man. Its substance was like theirs, and it stayed with them.

And he could influence nothing, nor anybody, in the normal world. The normal world was of a different substance. They could walk through walls, even people, as easily as they could through the ordinary air.

Then he saw the man in whose hand he had thrust the paper, looking down at his hand with a puzzled frown. The action of looking down was a short time in the future. He was suddenly elated.

He repeated the former action, but there was no result. The paper merely remained in the fellow's hand while he held it there. Then fell to the ground.

Then he wanted to laugh. If only he could see himself in the future. Something he was doing would attract that man's attention to his hand. And he had to find out what that something was.

He tried again to place the paper in the fellow's hand. But it wouldn't stay. While bending over, trying he thought of *stepping* into the future "frames" and looking back. Maybe that would help.

But how did one walk into the future? He felt that he had the problem. He didn't know just where it was. But it was somewhere right in front of his eyes. He had to get to the future!

He was! And the man was looking down at his hand. But the paper was in Blake's hands.

Nothing gained there.

OTHER parties came out of the *Rigel*. The two guinea pigs had survived. And for hours of their queer time they wandered through the frozen city.

The incident in front of the hangar bothered Blake. And when he met Old Sutherland, he reported it in full. The old man stared at him with piercing eyes.

"And you were trying to put it into his hand when you moved into the future?"

Blake nodded.

"And how did you get back?"

Blake tried to shrug, but the suit spoiled the effect.

"I don't know," he admitted. "It's a kind of a....a mind-walking, if you can get what I mean."

"I don't, young man. Do you mean it is a mental effort to move?"

"Mental and physical, both."

"Show me?"

Blake complied, shooting back into the "past frames." When he returned, Professor Sunderland insisted that they go to the hangar and see the man who had looked down at his hand.

The fellow was still there, and in the near future he was still looking down at his hand in a puzzled manner. Then he was shrugging and walking back inside the hangar. The professor stood, thinking.

Something about the field seemed stranger than before. Blake stared around, among the multitude of ships. Then his heart pounded.

He looked again to make sure. But there could be no mistake. The *Rigel* was gone!

"There is only one conclusion," pondered Sutherland weightily. "As long as you were moving forward in time, that man felt the note in his hand."

"YOU MIGHT as well forget it," snapped Blake. "The *Rigel* is gone."

"Yes, that is the only—" The professor's head snapped up. "What did you say, young man?"

"The *Rigel* is gone!"

"But it can't be."

"It *is*, though."

"But the captain—"

"Is coming now," Blake completed for the older man, pointing at a figure reeling toward them. "Was Jane in the ship?"

The old man paled. "Ye-es....I forced her to stay. She wanted to come, but I made her stay. I—I thought it was safer." The old man choked on the words.

Blake felt sorry for him, but had no thoughts to waste on sympathy for others. He ran to meet the captain.

Captain Benson's face was covered with dried blood. There was an ugly gash over

one temple. He staggered as he ran. *He had no suit.*

Blake caught him as he stumbled. He felt every muscle in the old officer's body writhe in the struggle for air. It was all around them, but absolutely unusable. Blake knew that the captain was dying, suffocating.

But even so, the old man gasped, "Crew . . . . mutiny!"

Blake let the loose-limbed body to the ground, where it lay on the ethereal support of the strange timeless world.

"The fools!" Old Sutherland's voice trembled with anger. "They've condemned the world."

"And us," added Blake, looking at the air meter of his suit. Two-thirds gone! And the captain's body showed the way they would die.

But it didn't seem so terrible. . . . if only there were some way he could hang those mutineers. His hands clenched tight at the thought of Jane, as their captive.

All along, almost subconsciously, he had been comforting himself with the thought that even if they failed to save the world, the human race need not perish. Jane had been the hope for that future. And he had secretly hoped to be the new Adam. And now that hope was gone. As was the future, for he knew that Jane wouldn't live, and submit.

Anger burned in him hopelessly. He glanced down at the body of the captain. Soon they would all be dead.

The dead body held his gaze. It looked queer. The skin was reddening, blistering.

"Professor! Look!"

At a glance, the older man knelt beside the captain's body. The dead flesh was moving slowly, swelling. Then one of the blisters ruptured.

The professor stared as though fascinated. The captain was dead. There was no doubt of that. And yet some strange reaction was going on within the body.

"What is it?" demanded Blake.

"I'm afraid. . . . that—is what will happen to all of us very shortly. You see, the energy we acquired is gradually dissipating. The air and his body are attempting to occupy the same space simultaneously."

Blake became aware of a dull aching in every part of his body. He knew that the process was already starting on them. They wouldn't even have to suffocate.

His phone buzzed. He switched it on distance and listened to O'Farrel's voice.

"Something's moving over here. . . . zipping past like bullets."

It took a moment for O'Farrel's information to register, then Blake stood up eagerly.

"Where are you? What is it that is moving?"

"At the other end of the field. And how in the hell can I tell what they are when I can't see them. . . . just a blur."

A blur! It couldn't be! Yet—

He turned and, grasping the older man's arm, started across the field.

"Look around, and back through time, see if there isn't a ship," he instructed O'Farrel.

"Plenty of them. . . . all around me," was O'Farrel's answer.

"I mean the *Atlas!* Or the *Persephone!*"

THEN he switched his phone on general and called the men to return to the field. Probably some of them were already feeling the effects of loss of energy. At any rate they had one slim hope, and they would have to move fast to take advantage of that.

"They're both here!" came O'Farrel's shout. "Or rather *were* here. They *are* here but way back in the past. I can barely see them."

"And they are getting ready to leave. Mike, you gotta go back and stop them. Have them come for us!"

"How? And why?"

"The *Rigel's* gone. And you saw me in front of the hangars. You do the same thing."

"Hell, you don't even know how you did it."

"Try!"

"Oh, all right, but *Ulp!* Jeeze! Tim, I did it!"

"Get one of those ships up here for us. And hurry!"

"Okay, hang on."

The phone was silent. And Blake devoted his energies to running and helping the old man.

"What's the use?" panted Sunderland.

"We've got a chance," said Blake. "That was the crews returning, that O'Farrel saw. They've been here longer than we have and probably have to get away in a hurry. But if we can get them to stop for us—"

He left the sentence hanging in his

phone. What was the use of finishing. If they didn't, he and all the rest from the *Rigel* were to die, unpleasantly.

Then a ship sped swiftly to the field in front of them. On its bow was the name, *Persephone.* The lock dropped open and they scrambled in. O'Farrel was waiting for them.

"The *Atlas* stayed behind to pick up the rest—a lot of them haven't come in yet. And are these babies in a hurry!"

It was easy to see from the faces of the men of the *Persephone* that they were suffering tortures. They were much farther gone than were those of the Rigel. He used his phone again to spur the *Rigel's* men in, and in a few moments they were streaming to the ship.

He peered back into the past. The *Atlas* was taking off. He wondered if they had been any more successful in their attempt to warn Earth. Then the last of the men were in and the lock sealed. The ship streaked upward to free space.

Blake, as ranking officer of the *Rigel,* was called to the control room of the *Persephone.* Captain Williams was a small, stout man with tired eyes.

"Did we get all your men?" he asked.

"All, except those who took the *Rigel,*" Blake reported.

He started to thank the captain, then halted when he saw that no one was listening. He looked around at them, puzzled by their behavior. He saw the screen. They were along in space.

"Where's the *Atlas?*"

"They didn't get out of the atmosphere," said Captain Williams.

Blake was silent. In a way, he was to blame. And the burden was leaden.

"Where did the *Rigel* head?" asked Captain Williams. "Your man says they left you—Why?"

"Mutiny."

Williams' lips thinned with a spaceman's hate of insubordination. He called the observatory lookout, ordered a telescopic search. And they all knew that it shouldn't be a hard job to pick up a ship in a static universe.

"Did you get through a warning?" Blake asked Williams, thinking again of Earth.

And Williams understood immediately. "They were holding seances all over the place. Thought we were ghosts. Guess we seemed like them all right, too. We could get in touch with them, as long as we moved through time at exactly the same speed as they were moving through time. But it took a lot of concentration to move that way, and as soon as we tried to tell them anything, we lost step. Guess we just disappeared from their sight."

"But did you—"

"Finally worked out a system of writing the messages on slates, and they photographed them."

"Then they know," Blake exulted.

Captain Williams smiled humorlessly.

"Yes....They know. They are pretty thoroughly convinced of the Second Coming. Some of their papers headlined: "MILLENNIUM NEAR."

THE communication panel squealed for attention. It was the observatory reporting the *Rigel* below Jupiter's orbit, and fleeing outward. Captain Williams acted quickly and the *Persephone* darted after the mutineers.

"Do they know about the sun becoming a nova?" the captain asked. And when Blake nodded, he added, "They're heading for Alpha Centauri."

Two watches later they were riding the *Rigel's* tail. And Captain Williams turned to Blake.

"In your hands now. I won't order my men across. Different levels of energy, you see. We'll return to normal before you do."

Blake's eyes widened. He hadn't thought of it, and Professor Sunderland was nearly prostrated by the loss of his daughter. He and the men of the *Rigel* had to get back to their own ship, and take the professor with them. The *Persephone* would be returning to normal, leaving them without protection.

They had pitifully few weapons from the *Rigel.* Blake armed the rest of his men from the armory of the *Persephone,* but had little hope that they would be of much use.

He went first, leaped into space in the direction of the *Rigel,* carrying a light cable. He struck amidships, slid aimlessly until he was able to place his boots solidly on the hull. Then the magnetic soles held him. The others followed along the cable.

Not until all had crossed did they go to the lock. He glanced around to see that the men had their weapons ready, pulled the exterior control lever. The lock opened and they crowded inside.

O'Farrel closed the outer portal, as Blake went to the controls of the inner.

"Ready," he cautioned.

He opened the valve. The lock filled with air. Then he yanked at the controls. The inner portal opened ponderously.

One man was in the corridor. They had a quick glimpse of startled eyes, of a mouth opened to shout. Then a heat beam cut him down.

"That was Ralston," someone muttered. Many of the faceplates had been opened. And none of the men showed any liking for their former mates. In all their minds was the thought that they had been left to die.

They went to the main corridor. Two more of the mutineers were burned down without a chance to give the alarm. Then the control room door opened and two men started down the companionway.

The men held their fire, hoping to get them without raising an alarm. But the mutineers saw them and halted. They got one. But the other leaped back into the control room and they heard the bars clicking into place—bars intended to protect the ship's controls against mutiny.

"O'Farrel, take half the men to the power room and cut the power. The rest of you get inside these cabins along the corridor. Those of you with weapons from the arsenal of the *Persephone* turn your weapons full on that door. Never mind the waste. Those guns wouldn't help us very long in any case."

The solid door heated under the combined beams. It rose slowly to a dull red, then in a few seconds was a brilliant white. Still it didn't give. It was built to take punishment.

There was a shout from below. "Blake . . . . Lieutenant!"

Blake answered.

"Miss Sunderland's down here."

Blake's heart lightened and he was free to do as he wished.

"You men with pistols, load with shells set to explode at contact."

A few of the beams faded. The door began to cool. He ordered the rest of the ray guns into play, then gave the men with pistols the order to fire.

A half dozen bullets turned the end of the corridor into an inferno. For a moment Blake was blinded by the glare, and his ears rang. But when he could see, the door was hanging loose.

The men were into the control room in a rush, an irresistible human tide of vengeance. And when Blake got there, there wasn't much to see. The bodies were charred almost beyond recognition.

He caught sight of the radioman, sliding his pistol under his belt.

"Call the *Persephone*. Tell 'em it's all okay."

The man shuffled to his post and Blake checked with the others on the damage to the ship. There wasn't much, and he sighed with relief. Then a hand touched his arm.

He turned and found himself looking into Jane Sunderland's eyes. She wasn't smiling. Her lips were trembling. He drew her into his arms.

"And after all my trouble!. . . . All the chances I took! I'm as much of a hero as he is. I took as many chances."

They turned to face O'Farrel. The powerman was grinning in spite of his disappointment. Jane caught his hand and pressed it. "I'm sorry, Mike."

"Don't be so conceited," he begged insolently.

The radioman reported: "Can't contact the *Persephone*, sir."

"But—" Blake started, then understood. The professor smiled with him, though weakly.

"There's going to be a change around here, too," Blake promised.

There was no sensation. Their only way of knowing that they were through to a universe a half million years older than the one they had left, was when the stars again became normal. But they were not as they had been before. Few of the constellations were recognizable. And the sun was a withered dwarf.

The radioman returned to his instrument when it called stridently. In a moment he looked up.

"The *Persephone*," he said.

Blake went to the instrument and saw Captain Williams on the screen. The man was smiling happily. Blake suddenly hated the fellow, wished that he could strangle him for his cheerful appearance. The Earth gone. . . . the sun gone. . . . and yet the fellow smiled.

"'Lo, Blake. Glad you won. Been waiting for you. We won, too."

Blake didn't answer. He didn't want to. He wondered why he had liked Williams before.

"And we came through to find Earth waiting for us. More mass, you know. So they arrived before either of us."

(Continued On Page 90)

"What's going on here?" he barked.

THE CASE OF THE VANISHING CELLARS

Wilbur and Stevenson expected the unusual—after all, weren't they Special Investigators for that type of phenomena? But when, one after another, people's cellars began to vanish, they found that they had a case on their hands that was a case!

by J. S. KLIMARIS

(Illustrated by Damon Knight.)

WILBUR tried to ignore the incessant jangling of the telephone, but it was a thing not to be ignored; its persistence finally aroused him. He picked up the receiver and mumbled: "Society for the Investigation of Unusual Phenomena, Wilbur, special investigator, speaking."

"Is this it?"

He stifled another yarn. "Yes, this is it."

"Oh," came the voice over the wire. "I want to report that my cellar vanished."

"Beg pardon?"

"I said," repeated the voice, "that my cellar vanished. I want that you should do something about it."

"About what?"

"About my vanished cellar!"

Wilbur removed the receiver from one ear, dug it out, then, on a sudden hunch shifted it to the other ear. He gave a little laugh. "I'm awfully sorry, sir," he replied, "but it sounds as if you keep saying something about a vanishing cellar."

"That's exactly what I am saying! My cellar is gone! Disappeared! I want you should do something about it! I live at 68 Elderts Lane; I have no time for monkey shines. Do something."

With that the voice hung up. Wilbur stared blankly at the ear piece, then put it down. This, he felt, was not exactly playing square, not considering the night he and Stevenson had just spent.

Wearily he picked up his hat and coat and banged on the door of a room adjoining the office; perhaps his partner might be ready by noon if he started arousing him now.

"EVER hear of anything like this before?" asked Stevenson as the pair counted the numbers on Elderts lane in passing.

Wilbur shook his head. "A new one on me. But it must be so, just the same. The man was not drunk, Steve, and it was plain by the way he talked that it was no joke. Besides, by his speech, it was pretty clear that he hasn't the imagination necessary for a hoax."

Stevenson nodded and indicated a red brick house. "Fairly well off," he speculated. "It'll be worth our while if we can find the missing cellar."

A portly woman answered their knock, looked at them suspiciously.

"We're from the Society—" Wilbur began.

"We haven't any dogs," she replied, closing the door in their face. It re-opened almost immediately, however, by a tired looking man in rolled up shirtsleeves.

"You're the investigators Come in."

Wilbur and Stevenson followed him into the kitchen, from which point it was clear that the door there led to the cellar. The tired-looking man stooped dramatically at the door, then, with the proper pause for emphasis—not too long—had passed, flung it open.

There was nothing to be seen!

Without question, the cellar was as gone as yesterday's yawn. The door itself was nothing out of the ordinary, quite genuine. Good solid wood made it and it behaved itself as a door should. But right above and before them, was cold white plaster descending downward and one solitary step. Where the rest of the steps should have been was solid earth, with a layer of green grass upon it, for all the lack of sunlight. Wilbur bent down to touch the earth and grass; it was real, complete with earthworms.

"Get me a broom, please," he said quietly to the owner of the house. The man brought one, and Wilbur turned it upside down, pushed it slowly into the soft earth. He pressed upon it with all his strength until it was buried in the earth up to the brush. Satisfied, he pulled it out, returned it.

"The stairway is gone, too," he explained, "otherwise I would have touched some part of it with the brookstick."

"But where is the cellar?" asked the tired looking man perplexedly.

Stevenson shook his head. "We don't know that, yet."

"We'll do the best we can for you," Wilbur assured him. "The Society for the Investigation of Unusual Phenomena has had a great many strange cases, but has never failed yet. If it is possible to find your cellar, we shall do it."

"What was in the cellar?" asked Stevenson.

"Wine. Full barrels of it. I make wine and then store it away. Last night I lock the cellar door, and this morning—no cellar. No wine! No nothing!"

"Has this ever happened before?"

"Never!"

"I think, then," said Wilbur, "we had better look around a bit. Would you please let us examine the house?"

They measured the rooms, tapped the floor of every one, listened for hollow sounds. They examined blue prints of the house with great care, went outside and examined the ground surrounding the house.

The sum total of their findings was—the cellar had vanished.

The house-owner, wine-maker, and cellar-loser was profuse in his thanks for the efforts of the two on his behalf. He offered them a bottle of choice wine which had not been placed in the cellar.

But Wilbur and Stevenson were not quite so happy about it. An hour later, back in their offices, they sat pondering, a pile of

the day's papers on their desk. What could have happened to the missing cellar?

AT PRECISELY four o'clock upon the same day, the city's police hammered upon the doors of one S. T. Spigelli, notorious counterfeiter, whose ten dollar bills could be found in 30 out of 48 states. They were there on business; they knew the evidence needed for conviction was to be found here.

Three police cars were in front of the building, two in back, and a squad covered the roof. Every possible retreat was cut off; Spigelli would be caught red-handed with all the incriminating evidence in his possession.

Within the building, the situation was somewhat different. Spigelli smiled happily. Admitted, he could not escape, but without proof the arrest would be useless. And he had a special safe built into the cellar wall for just such an occasion; they could tap those walls all they liked; they could search the house, but without an x-ray machine or a wrecking crew, they would never find it.

Laughing, he carried the equipment to the door of the cellar and opened it,

They found Spigelli unconscious upon the floor with all the evidence lying beside him. When he came to, he babbled madly about his cellar having disappeared.

P. G. SACAL, the Sacal of the Times-Courier, roared out across the city desk: "Six-column spread 89 point, VANISHING CELLARS HORRIFY CITY! No, better make that a seven-column spread of 96 point. CELLAR DEMON LOOSE! Yes, that will do it!

"No, better make it take up the entire front page. If you're short on space, reduce the masthead."

"What about the war headline?" the first-page man asked bewilderedly.

"The war! What war? Who's interested in a war at a time like this when cellars are vanishing all around us?"

The first-page man quickly bowed away as Sacal motioned with his hand. In place of the departed employee appeared the heavy-rimmed power behind P. G. Sacal's newspapers, Briston S. Dexter, famed poet and feature writer, whose column "I Think —Don't YOU?" is read daily for its uplifting message by the country's millions.

"Here are my editorials on Congress, the new war situation, the annual plea for a Dog's Day, and Community Spirit: How it can be developed. Will you put your okay on them, P. G.?"

Sacal withered him with a glance. "Bury them! Take a whole page with a special 35 pt. type article by P. G. Sacal himself. Quote: HAVE YOU A CELLAR IN YOUR HOME? Got that right? Okay, go on from there: WHAT IS THE ADMINISTRATION DOING TO PROTECT YOUR CELLARS? Put that YOUR in double thick black type. Got to impress the reader. Also have an American flag spread across the page. Patriotism. Got that?"

Yes, yes, yes!

The great man would have continued, but at that moment the giant presses of the Times-Courier stopped. Even in the soundproofed room it was evident.

"What's going on?" asked Sacal.

"Sir—" began one of the new copy boys entering the room.

"Yes."

"The paper for the presses is all gone."

P. G. Sacal stared at the boy for a full five seconds. He spoke in a somewhat strained voice. "Tell them to get some more from the cellar."

"That's exactly what's wrong, sir. They can't. The cellar has disappeared!"

WILBUR let drop the newspapers with a sigh. One by one they fell upon the floor.

"Any ideas?" asked Stevenson hopefully.

Wilbur shook his head.

"Well," continued Stevenson, "is there anything in common about the disappearances?"

"They were all cellars," replied Wilbur. "But what use is a cellar? Downright poor air-raid precaution, so we must eliminate that angle. Then what good is a cellar nowadays?"

"Simple," replied Stevenson. "It's not the cellars that count, but the stuff that's in them."

"And that," continued Wilbur, "is where the incongruent feature comes in. One cellar contains home-made wine, a rarity these days. But that seems right for a cellar-thief. Another contains a collection of good second-hand furniture; that's okay. Another contains a vault of ten-dollar bills. But of what earthly value is a cellar full of newsprint?"

Stevenson pondered. "Ransom, perhaps?"

Wilbur shook his head. "Not sound. But

perhaps we'd better call upon Mr. P. G. Sacal nonetheless."

P. G. SACAL, in all his somber glory, was sitting moodily at his desk when Wilbur and Stevenson approached.

"Hullo," he greeted them dully.

"Good day, Mr. Sacal," replied Wilbur. "We'd like some information about the cellar."

"What cellar?"

"The cellar that vanished yesterday; I read about it in the papers."

"In the Times-Courier?"

"No—other papers."

"Then it's a lie!" cried the great man. "Only the Times-Courier prints the truth. Our cellars never vanish!"

"But—I understood that—"

"Boy!" roared Sacal. "Show these gentlemen out!"

There was nothing else to do but leave as gracefully as possible. Surrounded by an air of confusion, Wilbur and Stevenson made their way past busy desks to the elevator.

"You shouldn't have irritated Mr. Sacal this morning," volunteered the boy. "He's pretty nervous."

"Yes, so he is," agreed Wilbur dryly.

"Upset about the cellar. He thinks he's getting old and beginning to slip, I suppose."

"Then it's true about the Times-Courier cellar?"

"Every word. It disappeared at 5 o'clock yesterday just as we were going to press with a big story about the cellar disapearances."

Wilbur carefully neglected to press the call-button on the elevator.

"Then what?"

"P. G.—I mean Mr. Sacal—thought it was all a good gag to pull on the administration. You know, undermining American homes and all that sort of thing."

"I don't get it," said Stevenson.

"Boring from within and so on. Very subtle sort of stuff. Well, anyway, Mr. Sacal didn't really believe it until his own cellar disappeared.

"That was enough of a shock, but then it came back this morning, so he's all upset."

Wilbur glanced at Stevenson. "Was anything changed in the cellar?" asked the latter.

"Not a thing. But they found a note there. It said: Pardon me, my mistake."

WILBUR and Stevenson ambled along Main Street, pondering. Suddenly Wilbur stopped in the middle of the sidewalk, ignoring the elbow punches of other pedestrians as they mangled their way between Wilbur and the lamp post.

"Steve!" he cried. "I have it!"

"Don't block the sidewalk, please," mumbled Officer Arrison as he wondered why suspicious characters always loitered on his beat.

Wilbur beckoned his colleague and started back to the lobby of the Times-Courier building. Officer Arrison watched the pair.

"Look across the street!" cried Wilbur.

"I don't see anything special," replied his partner.

"There's one thing," went on Wilbur, glowingly, "that has to be said in P. G. Sacal's favor. He built the Times-Courier building to blend with the architecture of those around it."

"So what?"

"So this: so skillfully did the architects design this building that one would be willing to swear that it is an exact duplicate of the City National Bank across the street!"

Stevenson opened his mouth to say "So what? again, then closed it with a snap as the full impact of the statement registered. "So that's what they're after," he murmured.

They whispered nervously to each other, constantly glancing at the bank across the street. Just enough to arouse the dull Arrison's interest. Then they went home.

SHORTLY before closing time, Wilbur and Stevenson visited the City National Bank. They bore satchels with them. As Wilbur had recalled, there were a number of offices on the second floor which were vacant. These they visited, for short periods. Just to make things better, they dropped in to the office of the public stenographer on the first floor after Stevenson had seen her go out.

Luck was with them. They managed to find several empty offices—empty for the moment, that is—on the main floor before their little job was done. Then, with the air of men who have been given the runaround, they made a deposit and departed.

No one noticed that their satchels were empty when they left.

Shortly after sundown, an alarm from City National rang in the police department. A squadron was sent out in force, but nothing was found. So far as they could discover, everything was in order. Except that an alarm had been rung.

Less than half an hour after they arrived back, the alarm rang again. They made a second trip for nothing.

Three more false alarms left them hopping mad; they took the bank guards into custody and left reliable men there. But, for all their stolid reliability, the alarms went off again.

On that sixth trip, they discovered several bats in the bank. It was obvious that the creatures had blundered into the electric eyes and set off the signals. The police spent a good hour cleaning out the bats. They got them all.

At eleven-thirty, that night, Wilbur and Stevenson broke into the City National bank. As to be expected alarms went off. However, the police were wise by this time. They assigned a crew to find the rest of the bats in the morning and went back to sleep—or whatever else they were doing.

ONCE inside the vault, Wilbur and Stevenson merely sat down and waited. Cellars disappear, reasoned Wilbur, because things were in them. The Times-Courier cellar had been taken by mistake; that could only mean that some other cellar in size, location, and appearance greatly resembled it.

The City National's vault was the exact size of the cellar in the Times-Courier building; it was across the street from the newspaper building, and was, in all ways, except as to content, an exact duplicate.

Wilbur smiled to himself at the perfect logic of his reasoning and deduction. But while his confidence waxed, that of Stevenson waned, for, suddenly, there was a rumbling and a movement about them.

The cellar was disappearing!

Wilbur and Stevenson stood up, reached for each other in the darkness. The roaring, faintly resembling the crash of two express trains, continued, drowning out Wilbur's words. There was an odd undulating of the floor underneath them. Then, suddenly, all movement stopped. They were forcibly thrown to the floor; an instant later, they heard a dull thud as if a third person in the room had also fallen.

A final click, the barely audible sound of the cellar slipping into position could be heard, then silence reigned. Nothing was to be seen in the jet-black darkness. Hesitatingly Wilbur and Stevenson stood and, clumsily groped their way toward the door. That door, they felt, must open into something.

They did not have to grope long. Suddenly the vault door was flung open and a long, thin man appeared in the doorway. A strong light shone behind him and his giant shadow thrown across the room.

In one hand, the stranger held a powerful searchlight. Wilbur sniffed to hold back a sneeze; the stranger whirled, stabbing out with a beam of light.

Wilbur reached for his handkerchief quickly. The light suddenly dropped from the stranger's hand and clattered on the floor.

"Don't shoot!" he gasped.

Not for nothing had Wilbur become Chief Investigator.

"Keep your hands up," he ordered, "and don't make any sudden moves." The stranger did so, his hands visibly shaking.

"Now walk slowly into that room."

They followed the stranger out of the vault.

ONE could not exactly call it a room. It was, rather, the epitomy of all cellars. Or, expressed in other terms, a cellar to outcellar all cellars. For in this giant room was the accumulation of many years. Here and there were huge piles of assorted furniture, beds, carpets, chairs, barrels, piles of wood, coal, newspapers, books, and all other odds and ends which the human race habitually stores in cellars. The room extended beyond the range of their vision, and they suspected rightly that the real loot was out of sight.

The stranger, hands in air and back still turned to them, was standing still.

"Okay," said Wilbur. "You may turn around now."

The man turned slowly. When he saw that neither of the investigators were armed, an expression of relief came across his face. He dropped into a chair and fanned himself with a handkerchief.

"But how you frightened me!" he gasped. "I thought you were the police.

You aren't the police, are you?" he added suspiciously.

"No. We are from the Society for the Investigation of Unusual Phenomena. I am Jeffrey Wilbur, and this is my colleague, Lester Stevenson."

"I am honored, gentlemen. My name is Martinoff. Welcome to my home."

"Nice place you have here, buddy," commented Stevenson.

"Oh, yes," replied Martinoff. "It's a fairly nice place, but I hardly expected visitors—so it isn't as in as much order as it should be. Rather a mess, I'm afraid."

"Not at all," replied Wilbur, "not at all. It's a fairly nice place. You—er—borrow them?"

"Yes. I—er—I can't help it, really," he replied. "Been short of funds lately, work hard to get and all that.

"And now it's become a sort of fascination to me. I just can't resist cellars."

"But how do you do it?" asked Wilbur.

"The principle," said Martinoff, "is extremely simple. Did you ever see a bubble in a tube of water? Just as air bubbles, with all their microscopic contents, can move, or can be made to move, in water, so cellars, with all their contents, move through the earth, through the aid of my apparatus."

"But earth isn't water."

"All a matter of relativity, Mr. Wilbur," replied Martinoff. "My apparatus is very complex, and I don't doubt that many would say it is impossible. My only answer to such objections lies around you; you have seen for yourself that it does work."

"But—I still don't get it," complained Stevenson.

"No? But then perhaps if I demonstrated—"

"Excellent idea," broke in Wilbur. "Would you mind?"

"Not at all." Martinoff unrolled a large map of the little city. Each street and house number was clearly marked.

"Just to show you that it is a fairly simply thing," he explained, picking up a pin and closing his eyes, "I will select a cellar at random." Blindly feeling the map, he pushed in the pin and then opened his eyes. Stevenson leaned over to see where the pin rested.

"The cellar," declared Martinoff, looking at the map, "is at 349 West Main Street."

He walked over to a set of dials which were gauged with streets and numbers, pressed several of these and stepped back. "This machine is expensive to operate," he said. "That is why I have had to put it to practical use." Wheels groaning and a sound of chugging interrupted him. The three stood to one side, waiting for the new cellar to appear.

"Hands up!" came a voice behind them. "And keep 'em up!"

Through the door leading to the bank vault stepped Officer Arrison, large bump on forehead and service pistol in hand.

"BUT, officer," pleaded Wilbur, "I can explain everything. This man here—"

"Turning state's evidence already, huh? Won't do you much good. I followed both of you, and I saw you break into the bank. It'll be a twenty-year stretch for you, at least."

There was a loud click in the room next to them. Behind the officer, a door opened and a group of men dazedly poured in. They gaped about them, but quickly caught the situation.

"Officer!" Wilbur shouted, "Look out behind!"

Arrison laughed. "You can't pull that gag on me. I'd turn around and you'd sneak up on me, huh? Well—" He broke off as one of the men seized him. There was a brief struggle, then Arrison was disarmed.

"All of you," barked the intruder training the policeman's gun on them, "against the wall!"

"Okay, wise guys!" one of the intruders said. "What government are you working for?"

The four made no answer.

One of the men whispered to the leader. He nodded. "Maybe you're on our side, eh?" He stepped forward and performed an intricate salute.

Martinoff paled, then gave an answering signal. The others stared aghast! This was the salute of the notorious Petanian Guards!

"Tu esi mano parapijonas!" the Petanian exclaimed, and rushed forward to embrace Martinoff, who replied, "Taip, taip, suneili, taip!"

The Petaninas jabbered for a few moments, then Martinoff turned to the others. "I am going to return my countrymen to their former position, which is the head-

quarters for Petanian activities here. After that, I shall sell them my invention."

"Traitor!" roared Arrison! "You won't get away with it!"

Martinoff coolly ignored them and spoke with the Petanians further. They tied Wilbur, Stevenson, and the officer securely, then entered their cellar. Martinoff stepped to the control panel, set the machine in operation. The walls rumbled again and the cellar was gone.

"I must explain," said Martinoff hurriedly as he started to untie the prisoners. "I am not a Petanian. I studied in the Barsenica Institute, which is a hotbed of Petanian activity, and, for my own protection, had to be on good terms with them. That is where I learned their language."

"Then why did you let them go, you fool!" grated Arrison. "They were fifth columnists!"

"Yes, I let them go," admitted Martinoff, "but not to 349 West Main Street; I sent their cellar to 349 East Main Street."

"What's the difference?" aske Wilbur.

"Considerable, if you will remember that East Main Street was made the garbage dump of the city about five years ago."

"Then—"

"Yes. The Petanian fifth columnists are now under thousands of tons of garbage. They can't get out!"

As a result of the digging up of the Petanian fifth column, personal matters for several of those involved became somewhat improved. Officer Arrison became Sergeant Arrison, and was already looking ahead to a promising career in politics. P. G. Sacal ran a special series of front-page articles on HOW THE DISAPPEARANCE OF THE TIMES-COURIER CELLAR LED TO THE DISCOVERY OF DEADLY ENEMIES OF THE NATION, photographs galore, and text written by the great man himself. And Martinoff was pardoned for previous offenses.

"Yes," he said shortly afterward on a visit to the offices of the Society for the Investigation of Unusual Phenomena, "this affair has cured me. I've reformed. I shall never steal another cellar unless it's something really big and worth the effort."

Wilbur coughed and Stevenson took the hint.

"I see by the papers," he said, "that Briston S. Dexter made a fine speech in Congress the other day."

"Really? What did he say?"

"He complained about the government putting all its gold into Fort Knox, Kentucky, which, he claimed, was nothing but an over-sized and over-stuffed cellar."

Two bright flushes appeared in Martinoff's cheeks and he bowed his head in extreme embarrassment.

Fort Knox, Kentucky! Wilbur fainted.

—THE END—

Time Exposure

(Continued From Page 83)

Blake stared blankly. "Earth?" he gasped.

Williams was grinning widely. "Yes. They got suspicious about all those authentic 'spirit' photographs turning up through the years. They investigated and discovered that the sun was to become a nova in ample time to construct some real Hsuings. They got them spaced over the globe just in time."

The men of the *Rigel* seemed alive once more. And space seemed less empty than it had only a moment ago. Jane's hand tightened on Blake's arm, and he covered it with his own.

"Of course, the sun is a pretty worthless affair, now," said Williams, almost apologetically. "But Earth is nearly ready to start for Alpha Centauri."

"What? Again?" someone exploded.

But Professor Sunderland's eyes were glowing. "A whole world!" Then a thought struck him. "I wonder," he murmured, "what would happen to a ship taking off in transit, and going through an additional change."

"Nothing doing," Blake said quickly. "Jane and I are staying with Earth." He looked down and met the agreement in her eyes.

O'Farrel looked away from them, met the professor's eyes. He hesitated only a moment.

"It'll be a good way to pass the time."

An Extravagant Little Story Is

THE SLIM PEOPLE

by WILFRED OWEN MORLEY

VASTNESS beyond the concept of man....vistas from which the Terrestrial mind would have reeled, desperately seeking escape in some comfort-making neurosis....life-spans seemingly eternal, reaching back into the unthinkable beginnings, extending into unseeable everlastings....

LIGHTLY, carefully, the Child caressed the glowing outlines of a tiny sun. "And is there life here?" he asked.

"Not yet," came the reply. "But take care, Child. There is life upon many of the little worlds wheeling around this sun. Be careful that you do not make your hand so firm that it blots out the radiations of the star, for then that life would perish."

The Child withdrew his hand, an expression of wonder on his face. "But how can there be living things on such—thick matter? Why they wouldn't know anything at all about half the radiations, father!"

Elnon of the Bright People smiled as his glance took in the solar system of which the Earth is third planet—were it just a bit smaller, he mused, he could span it with his arms. "They very probably don't know of many radiations, Child. To them, this little glowing star is the source of all life—space may be to their eyes little more than darkness lit here and there by similar glows from other stars.

"Their bodies must be as thick as the worlds they live on—and no more adjustable."

"You mean they can't extend themselves?" Child's voice contained a tenor of unbelieving dismay.

"I'm afraid not, Child. After all, remember how long it took you to learn how to make a small part of yourself thick enough to pick up that vagabond sun in the other galaxy. Yet this was natural to you—for them, it is something which they would have to evolve into after many generations."

Child pondered a moment. "Do you think that there may be any people on any of these worlds who might look like us?"

Elnon shook his head. "I don't think so—though it isn't impossible. After all, our people once lived upon a fixed world, bound to a single star. But to find other planet-dwellers formed like us—with but two eyes, two arms, two legs, and a single head—well, Child, it's a great deal to expect.

"It would be interesting, though—if we should find such a people, we might be able to catch one of them, then you look through him and see how our people were myriads of aeons ago—although you must remember, Child, that we were never as tiny as any of the dwellers of these worlds would be."

The Child was about to ask another question when a gleam caught his eye—"Look, father!"

"What is it?"

I saw something jump away from one of the planets."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes—see, there it is."

Elnon bent forward, his eyes piercing through what to him were the many-hued twilights of this galaxy. "Ah yes, I see it. A very pretty creature, Child."

Brilliant in the glow of the tiny star, the slim creature reflected all the iridescent colors contained in the system's sun. Gracefully it darted along between the little worlds.

"So, life in this system is not insignificant," mused Elnon. "The slim people are not bound to any particular world—that is good. They are adapted to space and yet are so formed that they can enter planet atmospheres at high speeds without harming themselves. They propel themselves in much

(Author of "No Star Shall Fall," "A Matter of Philosophy," etc.)

the way of the maranoid creatures of the water worlds—see that faint flash from their tail?"

Child nodded, his happy eyes shining. "Do you think they live mainly between the worlds?"

"That's hard to say. It may be that—again like some of those maranoids who are amphibious—they breathe space-substance but feed upon the worlds. That would mean that they have to emerge from planet-atmospheres every now and then.

"Or it may be that they spawn upon the worlds—lay their eggs deep within the atmospheres, or even on the surface of the worlds themselves."

"I'm going to see if I can catch one, father."

Elnon smiled approvingly. "Good. But be careful. Cup your hand around it and make your fingers thick very slowly lest you become too thick and crush it. And don't cover up the tail, the nose, or any of those venticles—that might harm it."

Child nodded understandingly, and swept his eyes over the panorama of space. The slim one had disappeared, but there must be others. His whole being thrilled with joy then at what he saw.

"Look, father—there's a big one!"

This slim creature was indeed large—and more inclined to fullness than the others. It moved no less swiftly than the first creature they had seen, but many flashes appeared from an enormous tail. And the creature was equipped with large fins as well.

"It must be a female," said Elnon. "Perhaps it is seeking a world upon which to lay its eggs."

"Oh, look out!" cried Child to the slim creature, forgetting that the being obviously could not hear his warning. For a considerably large bit of vagrant matter was heading straight for the beautiful slim one. Desperately she tried to turn aside, jet-matter flashing from her glowing tail and from her fins, but it was too late.

Child cried out as the matter struck the helpless creature and it rolled over as if in mortal agony; the matter had pierced its body and it careened off at a tangent.

Now from the venticles along the slim one's sides appeared tiny darting shapes which flashed for an instant and then were gone.

"I was mistaken," said Elnon. "The slim ones do not lay eggs—they carry their young within their own bodies; they are more advanced than I thought."

It was much later when Elnon, seeking the Child, found him in the system of slim people. There was an expression of sadness upon his face.

"What is it, Child?"

"The slim people. I cannot have them for pets."

"Why not?"

"They die. I cannot discover what they eat and so be able to feed them. When I pick them up, they breathe upon me with their flashes, as if they thought it would make me set them down again.

"I've tried to find their minds, but there is no answer. If I let them go, and I have not waited too long, they dart away after a while, but I can never make them come back. Their only response is to try to get away and keep from being captured again."

Elnon nodded understandingly. "They must be a very high form of life indeed so to value liberty." He glanced at Child's neck around which hung a chain with a curious pendant. "What is that?"

"A slim one—it was so beautiful—I didn't want it to die, but there was nothing I could do." His brow wrinkled. "You know, father, I think they must go to the worlds to die—I've never found any dead ones between the worlds."

"That well may be. But come, now; your mother is worried because you have been gone so long."

And on the way back to the galaxy where the Bright People dwelt, the Child told of what he had learned about the slim people, of their graceful sweep from world to world, of their love-making and play, how the young males would sidle up to the beautiful females and caress them with thin tendrils, then draw the shy creature close, and of the times he had seen them helping a fellow creature which had been hurt by a vagrant matter.

"It takes them a long time to grow, father. I've not seen any signs of aging in any of them—even though several times I saw young ones leaving their mother, and coming back to feed later."

And as he spoke, his fingers caressed the iridescent form of the dead creature about his neck, perfectly preserved in the cold of space. Fondly his eyes ran over the curious markings upon it, markings which to an Earthman would have been intelligible as *IPV Orion.*

THE AIRWHALE

The creatures were not entirely useless after all!

Illustration by Hannes Bok

by JAMES BLISH

IT'S NOT hard nowadays to get old Mark Harris to talk. His was a wild, roaring figure of a man in the first days of the Solar Union (they called it "Centrale" then); he knew Nikki and Owen and Barclay and all the other greats of that era; and from that stormy career he delighted to draw tales for us, his students in geotron mechanics at the Academy. In these days of law and order there was little for Mark Harris to do but spin yarns, and indeed, little for us to do but listen to them.

"Eh, lads," he says, "a story again? The Saturnian Wars, maybe. Or the fight we had with Hessinger's outfit, when that devil Petri turned up? I can remember—"

But today we had persuaded him to go back to the days when he was just another asteroid miner. Mostly those tales don't interest us much, because we liked to hear more of the famous old figures of history; but in this case we were curious to hear more of Harris' encounter with "Red Dan" Lothar.

This was not because of any glorification of the thrills of space piracy on our part. We had heard that morning in our history class of the almost mythical career of Lothar, and had found in our textbook a reference to his supposed enlisting of the Neptunian Thought College against an interstellar invasion. Then, too, he was listed as the only man ever to touch Io; and certainly it was an extraordinary kind of pirate who was an interplanetary explorer and a defender of the society against which he was a rebel, all at the same time!

Harris had once mentioned that he had met Lothar on Pallas in 2004, while doing prospecting work (and of course you know that Harris is credited with the discovery of Pallas in 1990, when he was only 22 and his pilot Karl only 20. You can see why in this year of 2054 he would have an inexhaustible stock of stories to enthrall his students).

In short, we were anxious to hear more of this extraordinary pirate of the spacelanes, who was everywhere at once and doing self-contradictory things; and so we drew out Mark Harris about the Palladian adventure. . .

EH, LADS, (he began) Pallas is a peculiar world. You can see that as soon as you land. It's one of the eight or ten 'toids in the whole Belt that is round like other self-respecting planets. Then it's devilish hard to approach; it's boxed in by

the other members of its family (number VIII, if you still remember Doc Commager's course from last year) and its orbital inclination is 34°—a nasty combination, because in those days before magnetographs it was hard to predict where it was going to be at any particular time; and also it meant a good long pull away from the plane of the ecliptic. It's so small you can jump sixty feet straight up and land without a jar, and yet in some spots it has a fairly dense atmosphere—

But, no fun in jumping the story, eh, lads? Well, Karl put us down in a deep, narrow valley on the day side, and we dragged out our prospector and our few other crude tools. The sun wasn't much bigger than the head of a thumb tack, and you could actually see it move, but that oddly dense atmosphere held a lot of heat and we were quite comfortable in our regular heavy coats. And what air, lads! Oxygen—why, we had to breathe shallow most of the time to keep ourselves out of a bona-fide oxygen jag. I guess there must have been around fifty percent of it.

The only vegetation was a kind of giant moss or lichen. Ever seen sphagnum? Well, it was like that, except that it was about three feet tall and rose from a solid sheet of green coating the rock. We had seared a place clear in landing—this was before geotrons were cheap enough for poor miners, remember—but the whole valley except for that bare patch around us was covered with the miniature forest. I couldn't see any stream or other water supply, but the humidity was high for such a little world and I guess there must have been some water underground.

Well, we had barely climbed from the airlock when those mosses began to shake violently. There was a kind of turkey-noise—"goffle, goffle, goffle"—and a pig emerged and waddled toward us. At least it looked at first glance like a pig.* It was progressing on ten rigid little legs, at a rate that would make a turtle feel like a speed-king; from the forward end of the football-like body, four eyes peered at us, and a V-shaped, trap-like mouth hung half open on the underside. It was the most comical thing I've ever seen.

"Pork-chops," I called, and whistled at it. It neither ran nor stopped, but continued to trudge toward us at the same even pace. It went all around us twice, still making that noise, and sniffing at the ship, our boots, our tools; then it goffled disgustedly and inched back toward the "woods."

"Doesn't like us; guess we're not edible," I commented. "What's the matter?" Karl's eyes were fixed over the rim of the valley, four hundred feet above us.

"Another ship, I think." I looked up at the spot he was indicating. Sure enough, a black oval was silhouetted against the semi-dark sky. Somebody come to welch on our claim, maybe. I pumped the charging plunger on my heat-gun.

"There's another," Karl announced suddenly. "They're coming down."

"They're small," I said, puzzled. "They don't look like ships to me, Karl. Look—they're only about thirty feet long, and absolutely quiet. Geotrons couldn't be mounted in a hull that size, and rockets would be slamming the echoes around to beat all hell."

WELL, LADS, you've jumped the story this time. Yes, it was a pair of airwhales come down to look us over, as the moon-pig had done. Remember, though, that we had never seen one before, or heard of one either, and the bright green things, "swimming" with their fin-appendages all spread out like fans, were somewhat startling. They floated gently down into the clearing, about four yards apart, and regarded us solemnly out of two colorless eyes set on the green hide like pasted glass lenses. They didn't seem aggressive, and the constriction that marked off the "head" was very small, so that it reminded me of the story about the terrestial whale which would choke on an restrial. Still, it was an awfully big pair of critters to be flying very close—

As we were engaged in these speculations the first of the creatures touched ground and opened its mouth—(I say opened its mouth; it was more as if his whole head had split on a hinge)—and to our amazement one of the little four-eyed moon-pigs stepped out, walked about two feet toward the forest at its usual gait, and squatted calmly down to sleep! While we watched, dumbfounded, the whale closed

* The moon-pig (Macroscolex planetoidensis), which has been discovered in various species on seven of the eight major asteroids, is actually not a pig but a kind of worm.

his mouth and swam unhurriedly out of the valley.

"We'll have to change Pork-Chop's nickname to Jonah," I proferred, but Karl paid no attention to this feeble witticism, standing and staring with a slight frown at the second of the airwhales.

"First ectoparasite I ever saw that was twenty times as big as the host," he muttered. The whale had been eyeing us and gliding forward with short strokes of his fins, but at the sound of our voices he stopped and opened his enormous green maw hopefully. Inside I could see the lemon-sized "throat" orifice, with its odd feathery gills; there were no teeth, only a single irregular white fang hanging from the roof of the mouth, like a stalactite, For a moment the queer creature floated with its mouth open, and as we made no move, it shut up again and stared puzzledly.

"It doesn't look very dangerous," I whispered to Karl.

"It doesn't look very dangerous," a scratchy phonograph hissed somewhere deep inside the airwhale. Then it watched us a moment more, and finally experimented with a few tinny goffles. This time it got an answer, for although Jonah remained calmly asleep, our friend of landing scurried out of the moss with more haste than we had imagined his kind could muster, goffling loudly and with all four eyes fixed on the white stalactite in the airwhale's reopened mouth. He climbed in without a moment's hesitation, and the whale, directing a reproachful glance in our direction, floated away in the wake of the other. "It doesn't look very dangerous," it rasped down at us as a parting shot.

Well, the day on Pallas is only some four hours long—forgive me, lads, I've forgotten the exact figure—and so we were forced before long to call our activities off. We were dead, and slept 'till two dawns later. Then we got to work with a vengeance.

Airwhales came and went, some disgorging Jonahs, some picking them up. They didn't bother us unless we happened to be burning something, in which case they were very nosey and actually had to be shoved away. We finally learned to ignore them, after crying "Spaceship!" to each other for two days straight every time one drifted over the canyon wall.

"I think that's an ingenious device for keeping the strain vital," Karl commented, chucking a chunk of ore up out of the pit to me.

"How so?"

"Any isolated group of animals tends to peter out, genetically speaking," he explained. "To keep a variety from degenerating there's got to be some new stock, new blood infused every so often. There's no way for the Jonahs to get in or out of these valleys unless the airwhales carry them. See—there's another coming in now. As for what he gets out of the hookup—"

But I was staring at the floating object he had indicated.

"Karl," I said grimly, "that's not an airwhale this time. This time it is a spaceship."

Karl straightened and shaded his eyes.

"Sure enough," he said in a perfectly conversational tone. "The Ganymedian, I should judge."

EH, BUT he was a cool one, lads! The Ganymedian, you see, was Red Dan Lothar's ship. A little geotronic scout whose ports, the legend said, were of blood red glass because Lothar had gotten accustomed to the presence of the color.

As it settled I could see there was no basis for the story, but my mind was none the easier for the knowledge. It sank very quietly into the moss near us and the disrod on the cabin top swung on us.

"Put down your pistols, boys," a voice came from a speaker below the control window. We could see Lothar's handsome, smiling face through it, helmet on, dark goggles pushed up over his forehead. "Toss 'em at your feet."

Well, shooting at the ship wouldn't have done any good. We could see by the way the mosses were flattened all around it that it was still surrounded by a tight-drawn gravi-web from the geotrons. We threw our heat-guns down, and in a moment two thin pairs of beams reached for them—tractors and drivers parallel, a clever makeshift for the lever-fields the modern ships have. The next moment he had swung our only weapons out of the valley and up onto the plateau. That was that. These valleys were really just deep, irregular wells; we would go gunless for a long time to come, if we lived long enough to worry about it.

Abruptly the flattened mosses bobbed up again, the airlock spun, and Lothar came out, still smiling and carrying an old-fashioned automatic in each hand. I guess he figured he could shoot both ways if the two

of us jumped him at once. (I'm a brave man, lads, but I wouldn't have jumped Red Dan Lothar if he was armed with nothing but a hat-pin.)

Cradled in the chin-strap of his helmet, which was hanging just below his mouth, was a small object like a radio tube, and from it with every breath he took little wisps of creamy fog were sucked up into his nostrils. Matrix-gas, the inert stuff we filled geotron tubes with in those days. A very ingenious arrangement, rendering it unnecessary for him to breath shallow. Evidently the pirate knew his Pallas.

"That's a good idea, that matrix-gas," commented Karl, still as cool as a best man's kiss. "I'll remember that."

"'Fraid not," Lothar said. "You see, boys, Pallas is my food supply. I can't have you going back and getting the place all cluttered up with patrol ships and IP men. I'm fond of my moon-pig."

"I thought you were sinking low to be hijacking poor 'toid-miners," I told him acidly. His smile broadened.

"You see my predicament. I think, gentlemen, that I will make some disposition of you—nothing lethal, you understand, but safe." With this enigmatic speech he reentered the Ganymedian.

Well, lads, the next minute Pallas rocked and spun and flowed before my eyes, and I was very dizzy; and when things steadied again and I had gotten my breath back, Lothar's rays had deposited us up on the plateau beside our guns!

"There's plenty to eat up there," the loudspeaker boomed. "You'll have to play Robinson Crusoe now, unless you can figure out a way to get back down to your ship. I did it when the Angel pulled this trick on me—but I'll bet you can't. Good luck, boys."

WE STARED at each other. The damned, handsome, ruthless devil! We capered furiously on the edge of the cliff and alternately swore and cajoled, but the speaker remained silent, no did we hear Lothar's voice again. . . .

Eh, lads, I'll just gloss over those days we spent foraging around, eating goggling moon-pigs cooked with a low-power ray and trying to figure out a way to get back down into that blessed valley. We weren't bothered by shallow breathing any more, anyhow—the air was even uncomfortably thin at this height. The valleys on Pallas, which are, as I said, just deep slits in the otherwise smooth surface, are the only places where the air is thick. Lothar stayed two days—sixteen hours altogether, shooting Jonahs and stocking up on the moss, which we later sampled and found not unlike a leathery water-cress—and then left the planet altogether, giving us a cheery wave from the cabin as he rose past us. Down below we could see our little ship and an airwhale sniffing around the deserted camp. I had unconsciously been hoping for some kind of a misstep on Lothar's part, but when the Ganymedian soared off into the Belt and disappeared I realized for the first time with full force the small chance we had of ever following.

"Sixty foot jumps are all right, but four hundred is something else again," I commented despairingly. "I wish we could fly."

"Fly," said Karl softly. "That's it!"

I looked at him, wondering if moon-pork-chops were mentally deranging.

"Look," he said. "Those plants—"

"The mosses?"

"No, sap, the airwhales. They're plants. Haven't you figured that out yet?"

"I suppose Jonah is a nasturtium," I put in scornfully.

"No, they're animal all right. The whales are a kind of parasite. You know how they go inactive at night?"

I remembered seeing several asleep in the moss during the short period of darkness.

"Well, naturally, being plants, they can't operate or manufacture food without sunlight. And carbon dioxide. That's the clue to the whole thing. There's not enough CO^2 in this air to support a plant as big as that. Well, the moon-pig breathes through its skin, like the lower animals on earth—remember we found no lungs in the ones we ate; and the airwhale picks it up and carries it around all day, while the sun's out, using the CO^2 to produce oxygen and carbohydrates. The excess sugar solution is dripped out to form that icicle in the mouth to attract the pigs, since they're too stupid to realize the genetic value of mixing strains."

"How about the eyes?"

"Lots of terrestrial plants have eyes, after a fashion. Even the lowly begonia. This is just a specialization. Perhaps this is a plant-animal, like the terrestrial Euglena, instead of just a pure plant. That would explain the voice. Anyhow it doesn't alter the primary relationship."

"I still don't see how that's to get us

into the valley," I said, returning to practicality.

"Simple. We'll just take the next airwhale down. Arriving in four minutes on track B—"

"You're crazy as a cometary orbit."

"Uh-uh. Remember how that first one we saw imitated our voices and the moon-pig's? That was an invitation, so to speak. 'Tickets, please.' It knew we were animals. And whenever we burned things, it sensed the carbon dioxide and came snooping around. See—here comes our baby-hopper now. Climb in."

I contemplated the approaching maw doubtfully. "It doesn't look very dangerous," it whispered. We looked at each other and grinned. "I'll flip you for it," I said.

I lost. Eh, lads, that was the wildest ride I ever took. I held the jaws partly open so that I could see where I was going, and every time old Psuedochepheus asteriis turned himself away from the valley I threw my weight toward it. Jonah, the real Jonah, never had the experience of trying to steer his whale from inside, I'll bet.

I was heavy for it, too. It had all it could do to fly with me in it, and when we finally did go over the edge of the plateau it was only by sculling violently with its fins that it converted our flight from a free fall to a safer pace. I think it was glad to get rid of me when we landed.

"IS THAT ALL?"

"Eh, lads, you're never satisfied," smiled Mark Harris. "I don't have to tell you how I picked up Karl, do I?"

"And you never saw Lothar again?"

His smile broadened. "Never again," he said, "and I personally have always thought he was laughing at us inside."

MALLORY KENT herewith offers a lovely angle upon

THE PEACEMAKERS

DANIELSON was well warmed up to his subject when I entered the hall; even before I caught his words, I could tell that by the eloquent flowing gestures he made with his hands and the beatific glow suffusing his face. Danielson is a fine old man, vital, I would say—not the dried-up specimen one encounters so often in this line of work.

Allowing for the inevitable impromptu comment, the old boy was just about ready to spring the punch. I slid myself into a vacant seat and listened. . . . "talk and talk and more talk. Untold amounts of energy dissipated in senseless debate—enough hot air to have filled all the balloons that protected London during the early stages of the war. Not that we aren't talking, but that we have already made our words suited to action.

"You all are acquainted with the events of the past few weeks—the 'new weapon' which has been attributed to secret machinations of the Allied Nations—the spheres which suddenly appeared over great battle-areas and rendered all explosives inoperative. That was our work.

"Gentlemen—and ladies—we are not simply dispelling hot air when we say that we are impregnable to attack. You will shortly see newsreel accounts in local theatres, showing the attempt of certain elements to 'rub us out.' Machine-gun fire directed at our persons has been ineffective; bombs have been no more successful.

"We could easily have prevented such attacks from being made, for we know well in advance the precise nature of these attempts, as well as what weapons would be brought into play; we permitted them to occur in order to demonstrate our invulnerability.

"WE ARE the Peacemakers. Not simple, naive old gentlemen in white robes, I assure you. Our staff is manned by men and women from all nations—yes, even from those still under the tyranny of the swastika—but not, I assure you, representatives of that gang. No such individual could possibly get through the rigid scientific investigation of the very roots of the applicant's being which we apply.

"We are ending the war now.

"But we are not stopping there. We know the causes of war; we know what is requisite for genuine, permanent peace upon this planet; we know, further, that one small organization, such as ours, cannot do the task alone. The vast majority of the world's population can insure peace—that majority desires peace. Our job starts and concludes with the elimination of the minority, considerable in actual numbers as it is, which has thwarted and would continue to thwart the will to peace.

"The function of the Peacemakers will be merely to see to it that that majority has a free hand to unite and reconstruct this planet, to reorganize Earth on an economy of abundance. Many of you may ask: is this possible? Can we have an economy of abundance without sacrificing the freedoms for which we are fighting? Must we give up democracy in exchange for this security of which you speak?

"We say to you: you must answer that question yourselves. You must work out the problem in your own way. The Peacemakers will not be dictators. The Peacemakers believe that the problem can be solved and will be solved—that you will do it."

Danielson paused for a long drink of water. "I have traveled much," he continued, "both prior to and during the late world conflict. I have seen the appalling scenes of desolation and wasted human bodies and minds both prior to and during this war. I have seen the horrors of scarcity where no scarcity actually existed. It was at this time that my mind revolted—

"Many of you are familiar with my rec-

ord. I was a wealthy man, as were many of my colleagues. Not all of us, but many. I, personally, have never known much of actual want. But I've seen it; that is enough. And to me the most shocking thing is not poverty in itself—but waste. Waste of fine, human material. . . ."

THE ADDRESS was drawing to a close; it was time for me to get away before Danielson called upon me to speak. I slid out of my seat and carefully threaded my way toward the aisle, wishing irritatedly I'd done so sooner.

But it was too late. Despite my efforts, the chairman caught my eye, and an instant later, my name was thundered out on the loudspeakers. There was nothing else to do; I had to get up before all these people.

What could I say to them? Might as well be forthright, I thought, and speak upon the subject closest to my mind. I collected my thoughts during his introduction.

"Our chairman," I began, "has spoken much of his horror at the waste in human bodies he has seen during his lifetime. And I concur heartily. Now that war is on its way out, this world can begin to build itself physically as never before. The energies heretofore concerted upon destruction can be devoted to construction.

"I have often heard it claimed that war is necessary, that without conflict, the human being would soon go to seed. However, it is only one particular war that we, the Peacemakers, are outlawing, war be-

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(Continued From Page 99)

tween members of the human species. The war against disease, and mental ill-being continues, must continue until absolute victory is achieved. Until this—waste—of which our chairman spoke, is a thing of the past."

I elaborated and digressed a bit for a moment, then bowed myself away to terrific applause. There could be no doubt in my mind that the world was on the verge of uniting.

ONCE BACK in my apartment, I closed the metal shutters and set up the blanket screens that had long been in readiness; there must be no interruption now. Through long Terrestrial moments I waited until at last my apparatus glowed, and the form of my galactic colleague appeared in the vision plate.

"Success," I reported to him, easing myself out of the cumbersome body-mask one has to wear on this backward world. "I advise the expedition be sent out at once, for it will take nearly a generation in this planet-time before it arrives. By then, all thought of aggression will have disappeared, and the human being will be a full-blooded, healthy, and invigorating specimen. We need no longer worry about our diminishing food supply."

My colleague smacked his lips appreciatively. "I'll turn in your report to the council immediately. Good eating!"

The visionplate went dark.

A QUICK glance at the contents page will show that our little prophecy department is pretty much behind the 8-ball. For the June issue, we promised Hugh Raymond's *The Darkest Night;* that tale was lost. For this issue we promised F. E. Arnold's *Wings Across Time;* this one was crowded out of schedule—less than two days after we'd sent the final proofs back with the announcement, we realized that the story could not possibly get in. So, from now on, we'll just say that a story is "coming" and keep our fingers crossed.

TWO stories in the April issue were in furious battle for first place from the first set of ratings to the last: the result of this disagreement is that neither got a No. 1 final score. But here's how it finally shaped up:

1. Passage to Sharanee..... 2.07
2. The Core 2.17
3. Mye Day 2.92
4. Galactic Gear 4.41
5. File 384 ..... 5.08

Miss Grey is heartily to be congratulated upon the margin over old Hotfoot (as Gottesman is known to numerous acquaintances) and we hope that we can feature a return engagement of these twain in Future soon. Note that Pearson's "Ajax Calkins" tale was close behind—and then the difference in margin between it and Conant's *Galactic Gear.* We might add that three stories were crowding Conway's *File 384,* too. They were *The Rebel Slug,* by Basil Wells; *Web of Moons* by Hannes Bok, and *Two-Way Time* by Albert A. Gilmour. Now, on to your letters, and we'll hear first of all from

JOHN HOLLIS MASON

Let me take this opportunity of commenting upon the April issue. The net effect was wonderful. Absolutely swell. You've done a beaut of a job. Just goes to show that our newer writers can match cards with established boys, eh? (Subtle plug; or was it?)

First, of course, was **The Core.** *Strictly speaking, I've never really cared for Gottesman before, but this time he's come through with an epic! Handling was amazingly good, characterization admirable. Madame Tung goes on my list of real characters; her demise only bettered the reality of the thing, much as I would like to have seen her again. I'm particularly patrial to psychological yarns and this one meets my stringent requirements with ease. I nominate* **The Core** *the best story to appear in the new Future (since your accession to the throne).*

By virtue of length, **Passage to Sharanee** *comes out second best. Otherwise I would have rated Conant's delightful little tale No. 2. But Miss (I presume the author is a Miss) Grey has a most engrossing idea in her initial effort and the handling of that idea justifies high rating. Very good, and, if a criterion of the lady's work, I bark for more.*

Now **Galactic Gear.** *A lulu, Mr. Conant, a lulu. I'd just about confined you to the doghouse after* **Forbidden Flight,** *but you've most wholeheartedly redeemed yourself. Anyway, first efforts aren't always an indication of what you're capable of doing, as I should know. Lots and lots more, please!*

The rest of the stories are so diversified that I won't try to rate them. Hannes Bok's offering was particularly appealing to me. I can understand that he's a music lover, all right. I am myself and thus I'm prejudiced towards the yarn. Parts of it seemed to bear more than a passing resemblance to impressions I received while at Fantasia. A beautiful word picture, worthy of many encores. . . . And that delightful little man of modesty sublime, Ajax Calkins, has again taken up the sword with his oppressors, I see. Very nice, Pearson, very nice. Right up to scratch. Seems that Ajax is becoming an institution with Future, eh? . . . A hearty handshake for Basil Wells. He comes across with a charming little tale of the surprise variety so pleasing to this palate. Would like to see more of this versatile author's work in Future, much more. . . . Wilson's **Four Star Planet** *wasn't bad, but I just couldn't see anything startlingly original enough about it to rate it up with the leaders. Competent job. But, oh! if it were only so easy as he pictures it to cross the void between worlds!*

Conway's story is old stuff, but I rather liked it. One of those just-a-little-different twists. Only reason it wasn't higher in the issue was because there was such a lot of really excellent stuff this time. Is this the fellow that criticizes you so much in the Futurian mag X?

To resume: A nice issue, Doc, very nice. Shows what you can do when you've not got your hands tied with those accursed reprints. Here's to many more like it!

78 Homewood Ave.,
Toronto, Ontario, Canada

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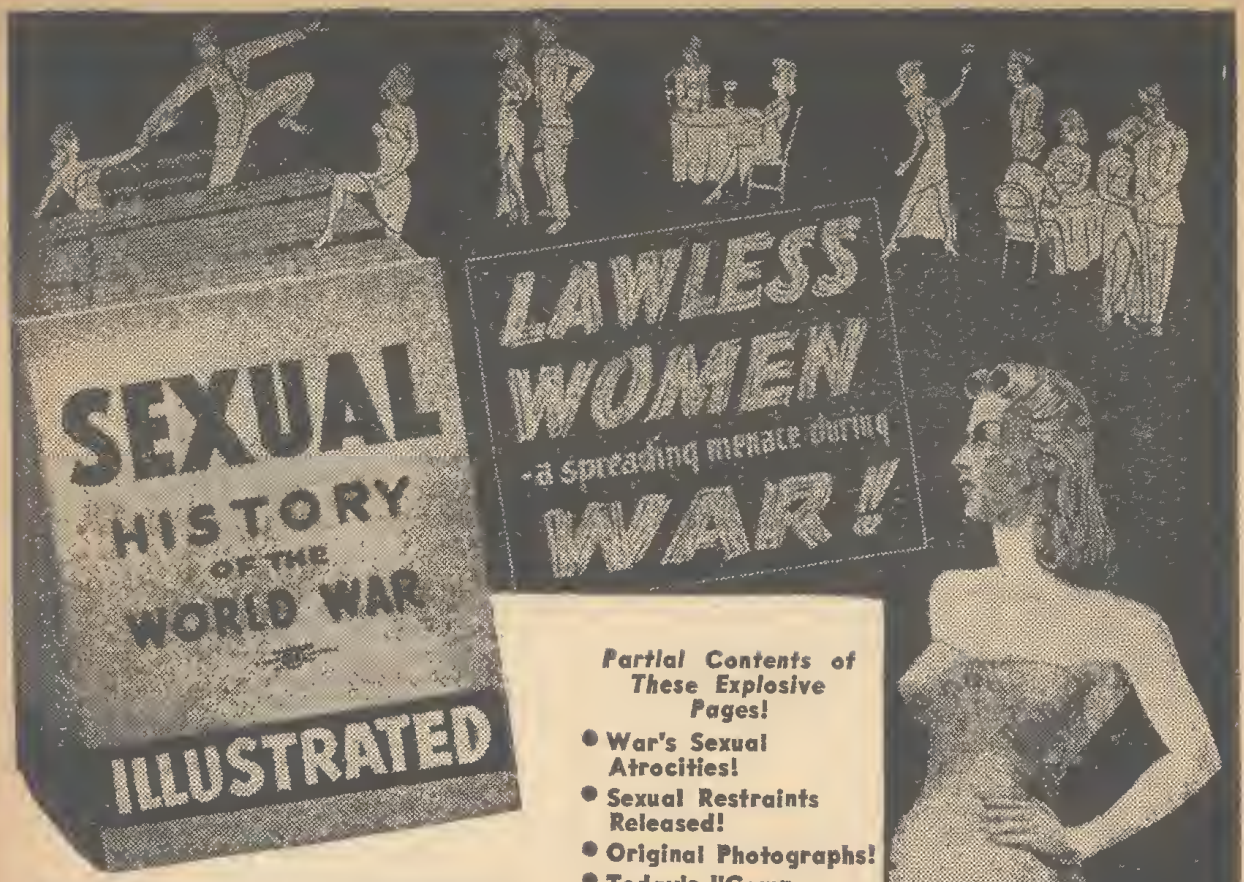

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You'll be happy to hear, then, that we have several more of Basil Wells' tales coming up. Farr's Miss Grey, Hannes Bok and Chet Conant go—you'll be seeing more of them soon's we can schedule some stories by them, which same strike us as being up to their standard. Now, here is

L. Y. ENGELS

Dcar Editor:

Spring is here, but I'm afraid that from the contents of the June issue no one would know it. It still reeks with the slow slovenliness of a cold winter in which the fingers are much too frozen to bat out on the typewriter a story that is alive, gushing, vibrant. But then, is that too much to ask? In heaven's name, Mr. Editor, let's have some stories that present entrancing possibilities, that set the mind throbbing to the rhythm of the universe's meaning. Give us tales that will stick pins in our comfortable satisfaction with life and with science. Is an ordinary adventure story with an interplanetary or futuristic background sufficient for a magazine called **Future?** *No, I don't think so, Mr. Editor. Perhaps I should write a letter to the editors of the other scientifictional magazines suggesting the some things, but it seems to me, Mr. Editor, that you are in a far better position to do something about making stf writing more "inspirational" (if you will forgive my use of suoh a word) than the others. Most of Future's writers, as I understand it, are new. If so, they must be beginners, young men. Why not coax them along this line? Ask them to make their stories not only "stories" that "happen" to be placed in the future—but hove them write stories that are* **futuristic** *in that they make the reader look ahead a bit, make him wonder, make him think, make him be prepared mentally and spiritually for the great changes which the near future will bring us.*

Perhaps that is asking too much from entertainment fiction. But it still seems to me that this "futuristic" or "inspirational" quality is the thing that, when mising, makes a story disappointing. I would like to hear from other readers on this.

In case you would care for my opinions on the last two Futures:

April: **The Core** *takes my offering of the laurel. It's a really fine story, one of the few that I have thoroughly enjoyed. While it is true that the dummy-characters are more the shadows on a wall and that the tale leaves one with the vague feeling of great expectations meagerly realized, I nevertheless heartily enjoyed it and the hundred or so ideas which S. D. G. so freely tosses about right and left, like flowers. (The novas that bloom in the spring, tra la!)*

Second place goes to Grey's **Passage to Sharanee.** *A somewhat inconclusive ending prevents it from sharing honors with* **The Core.** *Third place is divided equally among* **Mye Day, File 384 and Galactic Gear.** *I did not quite like the Bok story. It seems to me its place was in a weird magazine, not in Future. As an artist Mr. Bok is superb, but I don't think he quite has the feeling for stf to be able to write it with the skill with which he makes a drawing. Introduce Mr. Bok to Mr. Gottesman, or do the gentlemen know each other?*

June: Though using a theme which I remember reading many times, Morley's **Message for Jean** *is, in my opinion, this issue's best. It's curious to compare Morley as a writer with Russel Blaiklock* **(Invisible Continent).** *The first, apparently, knows enough to say only those things and describe only those facts which will hold up his climactic ending. Blaiklock, and many others, too many others, think that a simple narrative description of this or that with a lot of pseudo science and supposition tossed in is enough to make a tale. It isn't.*

I enjoyed Kummer's sprightly **Spring Machine.** *Let's have more along the same line—amusing tales. Blish's* **Solar Comedy** *was a distinct improvement over his last* **Topaz Gate.** *He is beginning to learn to write. Keep it up, Mr. Blish.*

Whatever happened to the "finish the story" contest? I did not get around to trying my hand in ithe first one. How about another?

419 Lorimer Street
Brooklyn, N. Y.

Personally, we'd iike nothing better than to fiil each issue of Future with stories having the "inspirationai" undertones the iack of which you bewaii. We've never yet rejected such a story when same was submitted to us. But there's the rub, friend Engeis: we do not receive many such stories, and, though we're constantiy encouraging those of Future's authors who do come through with that type, they're stiii in the distinct minority. And we think that our feiiow editors wouid teii you the same.

Again, we'd iove to run another "finish the story" or "what did so-and-so do then? Why?" contest, but the same thing stands in our way; we haven't seen any of them since *A Million Years and a Day.* Perhaps, Mr. Engeis, you couid help us out? Now, we present

PAULINE BOOKER

I hove the April Future right on my desk, so we'll pass on to it.

Well, Doc, it seems you have done yourself proud on that issue. And I'm not saying that just to please you, either.

First, no Cummings reprint. (Thonk God, maybe Cummings has mode his last ride: I surely hope so.) No reprint of any kind. Swell. I hope you keep that "No Reprints" stamped on your cover from now on.

The cover itself—well, according to your rating system, I'd almost be inclined to give it thot rare 1. It is good, even if it isn't by our Hannes. It's dignified, and it seems technically well put together. Forte seems to have put real feeling into his cover, too; the girl's clenched hands and wide eyes give a genuine impression of fear. And the black figures on the ground are not too monstrous nor are they drawn with wooden lack of imogination; they are life-like and oredible. The art work on the interior—let's say 4. I don't, personally, care much for Knight.

Departments—4. You're improving Station X, I think. Now to the stories:

The Core—*I'm going all out for this one and giving it 1. Ah, more Gottesmon. This is the sort of yarn I have been waiting a long time to see in Future. The idea, I think, isn't so new—couldn't be if it goes back to '34. But, boy, Gottesman took his space ship and his characters and practically gave us a whole course in sociology. I love you, Doc, for printing this one.*

Passage to Sharanee—*A darn good yarn. You commented: "In some respects perhaps it was not all we had hoped for." I puzzled over that comment a good bit, especially after I read that story. I read it carefully, and it was good, I thought; and then I thought it would be even better in a weird magazine, without the stf dress it was in. Maybe that is why a yarn doesn't ring true, sometimes, Doc; it is fantasy, and the author has put in some pseudo-science that inserts a false note. So moybe that was the trouble with* **Passage;**

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she (I presume the author is a woman since she bears a feminine first name) should have been more scientific and less weird in her writing, or she should have made it straight fantasy. She never did explain her mysterious character satisfactorily; and, since the reader was expecting a scientific explanation, that gave him a let-down feeling.

I've been rambling on about this point because it is one that I think about a great deal. I could write a story myself and say: "Now here is a whoosis. It can change its shape at will, be most anything it wants. It lives somewhere in the cosmos, in some far universe." Is that stf, Doc? If not, then, just what is stf? I read Ross Rocklynne's article in Writer's Digest; he said: Start with a sound scientific premise and stick close enough to it so nobody can disprove you, and the editors can't kick on your yarns.

I guess Helen Weinbaum has the formula down pat; and Leigh Brackett. . . . (Now don't tell me Carol Grey's one of these ladies in disguise. If you do, I'll retire to a nunnery and let this zany world go by.)

I'd better stop. Keep up the good work. Love to Bok and luck to Doc.

Goldthwaite, Texas

When we said that *Passage to Sharanee* wasn't all we'd hoped for, we were referring to the somewhat disappointing compression. It should, we thought, have been several thousand words longer, and more rounded out toward the end. The question of just what use the *vombis* had for the minds of the four humans, and why Mona Holloway alone remembered what had happened was never cleared up. Had this been a true account, of course, that would have been in order. It's a bit odd, but readers of fiction usually demand a good deal more from stories than they do from reality; any number of true accounts could be written up as stories, and would be rejected on the grounds of their being too utterly melodramatic, incredible, fraught with unexplained, and, perhaps momentarily inexplicable, material, and so on.

There's a reason for that, of course. A writer is master of all the situations, motives, and plots in his story. Nothing is actually left to chance: readers—partieularly stf readers—want the writer to exploit that situation to the full and not to try to be as illogical, elusive, or exasperating as reality.

We can assure you, Pauline, that Carol Grey is *not* Helen Weinbaum or Leigh Brackett.

In regard to the "formula" for stf: we disown it. We refuse to fence ourselves around with any fixed policy. There are some types of story, or treatment of story which we do not like; these we send back to the authors. There are a number of taboos in the pulp fiction field; these have to be kept. But, outside of that, any story which appeals to us goes on our acceptance list whether it conforms to rules or not. (Of course, being an ardent stfist, we wouldn't like a strictly weird, mystical, or supernatural story submitted to Future.) Incidentally, *Passage to Sharanee*, we would class as stf, although definitely bearing toward the fantastic side. Because the *vombis* was presented as a scientifically explainable phenomenon, even though a complete explanation was not made. Now, to

BILL STOY

Dear Doc: Glad to see that Future has taken another important step forward with the new policy of no reprints . . . meaning that a new crop of writers has been cultivated enough so that an entire issue can be filled with 'em. And another thing to rejoice over—no more Cummings! Still, I suppose some

credit is indirectly due him. After all, his "classics" (such as they are) served as fairly good fillers during the time that you began building a new bunch of authors for Future, starting practically from scratch.

Gottesman's **The Core** *certainly shows the other stories in the issue off at a disadvantage . . . and not because the quality of the other yarns is low, either. Simply that* **The Core** *is the best thing published yet in Future, with the possible exception of* **The Man on the Meteor.** *Seems somewhat reminiscent of the better type of literature as published in a certain large-size competitor of yours. Hmm. Wonder if S. D. might be able to develop a series based on that future visualization?*

The three novelets are definitely left in the cold as regards the next three places, shorts crowding them out rather effectively. These were, in order, **Mye Day, Galactic Gear,** *and* **File 384.**

Seeing that the second place tale was an Ajax Calkins, there isn't much need for comment; it's another example of Pearson's usual good workmanship. Might say, though, that I'm glad he didn't stress the bragging egotism too much this time; it would have become monotonous eventually.

Galactic Gear *is the type of yarn that Future has need of in greater quantity. Nothing world-shaking. Nothing of "vistas unthinkable." Just a little story of a fantastic occurrence that, somehow, has quite an appeal.* **File 384** *isn't bad, either: certainly much better than the average invader yarn, and with a slightly different twist.*

Of the other stories, **Web of Moons** *is best . . . which is none too good, though the descriptive passages deserve some praise. Bok seems to have talent along these lines, all right, only it remains an undeveloped potentiality.*

As for his single pic of the issue, I thought it poor. Mebbe I'm in a small minority, but I don't have unqualified admiration for his work. True, I like 90 per cent of his drawings, but as for the other 10 per cent . . . well, it's below par and nothing to boast about. And this, to me, seems an example of that other 10 per cent.

Liked the Forte cover. With his different style, he makes a good alternate for Bok. I agree, though, that his humans do have a slight woodenness. As for the others, Streeter's illustrations are good while Conanight and Kyle (who has a style something like Paul's, if you look hard enough) are fair. Oh yeah—for a change, Knight's piece is fairly good. How about some more Dolgov, who, to my way of thinking, surpasses Bok at times. On the whole, considering other stf artists, I'd say you have a pretty good bunch of illustrators for your two mags.

Station X is good as ever, though the editorial comment at the beginning is a little too long and discusses too many trivialities.

140-92 Burden Crescent
Jamaica, N. Y.

We are taking your suggestion, Bill (several other readers have also commented along the same lines) and cutting short the editorial ditherings at the opening of this department. We'll still spout a bit after each, but will leave more space for you readers from now on. Now, here is

PAUL VINSON

Dear Sir: I was somewhat disappointed when the April issue of your magazine came out without another of Mr Cummings' splendid novels. You see, I'd read several of the "stf" magazines before and had not cared for most of the stories, but when Future started in with **The Man on the Meteor,** *and it seemed*

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that you were going to have a complete classic novel in each issue, I put your magazine down on my "steady" list. But perhaps you can get some new stories from Cummings if you're not using any more of the old novels? (I think you mentioned somewhere that you hadn't usd them all—the classics, I mean.)

Well, after reading the April issue, I still missed the lead book-length story, but it wasn't as bad as I feared. I realize that using so long a story in each issue kept you tied up—you couldn't get in something like **Passage to Sharanee** *which had a fine human feeling all through it, believable, and understandable people instead of wooden dummies, as in so many tales, and just the right element of wonder. I think that is why Cummings has such an appeal for me: his stories have all the fine imagination I want in this type of fiction plus people. It's true that the plots are very similar but I don't mind that so much; after all, if I want a tricky plot, I'll look into the whodunit field. If I happen to find one in stf, well, that's all to the good, but I look first for real, understandable human beings set against unreal backgrounds. And, of course, believable and interesting unhuman beings and incredible occurrences which do not insult my intelligence (if any!) at the time I'm reading the story.*

So, that is why I liked the first story mentioned, and also appreciated **Galactic Gear** *very much. Conant also wrote* **Forbidden Flight,** *didn't he. That story was rather trite, but this story of Sylvester Peeke shows splendid improvement. I hope to see more of his tales.*

With the rest of the stories—well, **File 384** *was smooth enough, and had a different twist.* **Mye Day** *was very amusing, as with the other two accounts of Ajax Calkins. I hope you will keep this series running so long as it remains as good as it is.*

Well, I guess that's about all—except to say that I like your choice of covers. Bok and Forte are both top rate. And I suppose that if you can get good new stories everything will be okay—but if you can get some more of Mr. Cummings' novels, once in a while, let's see them, huh?

General Delivery, Mount Vernon, N. Y.

You'll find another Cummings novel, *Brigands of the Moon,* in the No. 8 issue of Science Fiction Quarterly. But why not try the current issue first? I'd like to hear what you think of the new tales by Arthur J. Burks and Hannes Bok.

New stories by Ray? Right here: see page 4. Now comes the Director of the Futurian Society of New York,

JOHN B. MICHEL

Dear Doc:

This is my first out-and-out **fan** *letter for many a long and weary year. I had more or less decided to give up spouting my opinions of artists, authors and editors—because who gives a damn about 'em anyway? But the progress of your magazine, Future, demands comment.*

A year ago when you took over Future and the Quarterly, we all had high hopes for both of them. Hornig had just about brought the magazines to their lowest possible levels. The injection of a little Lowndes serum brought immediate results. Now I didn't have to read your early issues carefully to know that you had exercised at least a modicum of' care on the selection of stories. I was present when most of 'em were accepted and I am acutely aware that your reasons for so doing were more than fair. This has remained true throughout and applies also to the illustrations, many of which I've had an opportunity

to discuss critically with you. Another good point I've had the privilege of observing at first hand was your obvious conscientiousness in your attitude toward both your mags. I know you've worried about 'em, nursed 'em through periods of crisis and devoted loving care to their interests and to the interests especially of their readers.

I think that in the main the hopes of your friends for vast improvements in Future and Science Fiction Quarterly have been fulfilled, though many is the minor boner you've pulled and will, no doubt, pull in the future. An excellent example of this is the April issue of Future which displays many contradictory features, adding in totality to a picture somewhat criss-crossed with literary and artistic triumphs and some few annoying bad patches.

Taking the art work first, since this for some reason comes to my mind at this time, I want to say that in my opinion the cover was one of the worst pieces of tripe I have ever seen in my life—and I've seen a lot. There are so many bad points in it that it would be impossible to describe them all in the short space of this letter. Suffice it to say that both the conception and execution were abominably bad.

Streeter's illustration to **The Core** *was mediocre. Why use him? Knight could have done this better. His illustration for* **File 384** *was competent, but since the scene was at first glance definitely unsciencefictional, so what? Forte's* **Two-Way Time** *picture was good, though nothing to rave about, while Knight came through very well in both his illustrations, the one for* **Old Man Mars** *deserving special mention. I have never liked Kyle's* **pnblished** *illustrations so the piece for* **Four Star Planet** *receives my condemnation. Utterly Hack. Best art work in the issue was done by Bok illustrating* **Passage to Sharanee.** *The original of this work,* **minus** *the deletions when published is one of the finest things I have seen yet from Hannes' pen.*

The stories were easy to rate and I note that this particular issue has a bunch of excellent ones. In order I liked **Passage to Sharanee, Mye Day, Galactic Gear, File 384, Web of Moons** *and* **The Core.** *I have not read* **The Core** *thoroughly, but I am acutely aware of Gottesman's fine writing in the past. Glancing through this one I fail to find any degeneration in his style. Still, I think I'll let* **The Core** *pass for a while until I feel riper. The rest of the stories were either too dull or too badly written to comment on. Futurian Times and Station X continued to be entertaining.*

The June issue failed to register as well, except for the art work, which was superior in quality to the April number. Knight, Forte and Paul did some good interior work. Forte's cover was mediocre, an improvement on his previous one, but still unsatisfying. Musacchia poor.

In the literary phase, the June number was a distinct disappointment. Not one single story was **ontstandingly** *super. You see, I've gotten so used to your custom of at least one hyperdyper thriller per issue that I am flabbergasted when one fails to show up.*

Thought **A Message for Jean** *the best piece, followed by* **The Real McCoy** *and* **The World in Balance** *in that order.* **The Spring Machine** *wasn't bad, but who cares one way or the other? Blish's* **Solar Comedy** *I read in mss. form and do not care to comment on here.* **The Princess of Detroit** *was an amateurish piece of writing, while Gernsback's* **Infinite Brain** *was an out-and-out imposition on the readers.*

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I cannot bring myself to read **The Invisible Continent.**

Good luck on future issues. Watch your art work.

136 East 28th Street, N. Y. C.

The loss of Hannes Bok as an illustrator has hit all of the stf and fantasy magazines for which he did work quite hard—particularly Future. And the simultaneous loss of B. I. Dolgov, who many acclaimed as Bok's peer, and some as his superior, has been an additional blow from which we are still reeling, so to speak. Forte has done some fine work for us in the past, we think, and he has been continually improving; we have a splendid array of drawings coming up by him. Musacchia is also getting in the stride—note his drawings in this issue—and Damon Knight, whom many disliked at first, is gradually developing into a first-class fantasy illustrator; he still has quite a way to go, but he is progressing steadily. When he arrives, your editor will feel justly proud of the role Future and Sci-Fic Quarterly played in his development.

In regard to the covers—well, if we agreed with you on the April and June frontispieces, they never would have appeared. So there's no need to go into that point. However, we're glad to note you liked the June cover, even if but in comparison, and hope you'll find this present August cover to your liking without reservations. Comes now a missive (or is it missile?) from

EARL ANDREWS

The disappearance of Hannes Bok from your cover was something of a shock to me as to most of the readers, I suppose. Except, of course, a few like Mr. Andresen, who probably broke out into gavottes and other manifestations of joy. But after the initial alarm was over, we find that the catastrophe could have been worse—you might have been left stranded high and dry without any semblance of a competent cover man.

For the moment, I should say that Forte **is** *a semblance, if you get what I mean. There are several deefcts in that April cover—for example: The disc should have been a glowing red and the lettering some other color; the little black figures do not stand out as well as they should, and that whatsis on the ground looks more like an overgrown snail than anything else. Yet, I'll have to admit that, at first glance, the cover was attractive; it made me want to pick up the magazine. And further, the sky, clouds, mountains were very good as were the two figures. Forte managed to get an excellent bit of dramatic feeling into the girl without cartooning it, and the man is well done.*

The June cover is better in nearly every way, except that the gorgeous damsel is missing. Hi ho, perhaps we can stand it for once, but please don't let it happen often. You are to be congratulated, though, for not having a girl dragged into that scene by her toenails—I know several editors who would have insisted upon it.

On the interior art work, we have Bok, Forte, Knight, Paul, Streeter, Kyle and Musacchia, what? I've commented upon the first two before; no need to add much except that Bok's drawing for the Carol Grey story (you wouldn't have the gal's address now, would you, old fellow?) ((Sorry, old sock, but I got there first. Ed.)) was a dandy farewell appearance, and that Forte's pic for the **Solar Comedy** *showed a definite pickup.*

With Knight: **The Old Man Mars** *drawing is very good, though there are still traces of the cartoonist. Same can be said for his work on* **Invisible Continent** *and the* **Real McCoy** *(though the drawing for the latter is perfect*

for the story). His two little thingamajigs for the contest page were delightful. However, Damon's doing duckily. Streeter is distinctly a cartoonist, but I always liked his drawings—they were one of the few bearable things about the old Future Fiction. And his spread for **The Core** *is no exception. There is a steel-like quality to it—and a perfect fit to the metallic, inhuman undertone of the story itself. More on that later.*

As a drawing by itself, I wouldn't take a second look at Kyle's full page for **Four Star Planet.** *But after reading the story I can appreciate it: it has just the right fanciful, whimsical, and Rover-boyish touch. Unfortunately, I've seen Kyle's work before and realize that it wasn't planned that way: he always draws like that. Some misguided souls have compared him with Paul, I see. Hmm—welll, they do both use double-pointed pens and by the looks of Dave's thing, I'd say that he does his work several times reproduction size. But that is about all—might as well compare E. E. Smith with Sam Moskowitz because they both write epics and both get awfully maudlin and silly at times.*

That brings us to the real McCoy (sorry, Raymond, old fellow; I haven't really come to you as yet)—Frank R. Paul himself. Considering the really enormous output he's achieved during stf's existence, it is not at all surprising that a lot of drawings have been stinko. The astonishing thing is that large number that are excellent—many of them being drawn today. Paul's full page, need I say, was super super super.

On your new artist Musacchia—can't say much as yet. I think I saw a couple drawings of his somewhere else and in a different style. And liked them better. But this one isn't bad; neither is it particularly good. So, all I can say is: Let's have some more, so we can decide whether we like him or not.

Gad—here we are at the third page and no comment on your fiction yet. And please believe me, old soak, I'm not the kind to buy a mag and just look at the pitchers, write glowing letters, and perhaps read the stories next year. By no means. Of course I look at the art work first—it helps me to decide at times which tales to leave till last. But, no matter: here's some dope on the stories in the April and June issues.

Item: **The Core.** *If you'll forgive me, I'll misquote Shakespeare: "'Tis a tale told by a robot, full of brilliance and zest but lacking human significance." I'll give Gottesman credit for one thing, however: apparently he woke up to the fact that he cannot create real characters, and stopped trying.*

Item: **Passage to Sharanee.** *We now quote Der Meistersinger: "Do you first make your own rules then abide by them well." And that is what Miss Grey did. Ah, Carol Grey! Ah, spring! Ah! Prithee, my Lord Editor: willtow kindly vouchsafe unto a fellow Lothario certain divers information. Tell me now of yon Carol. Doth she walk in beauty and so on? ((My dear fellow. !!! Ed.)) To get to the story, which is the best in 1942 so far I've seen in any publication—maybe I'm all wet as usual! (I was dropped into a bathtub at an early age) but it seems to my naive brain (?) that any gal who could write a story like that must be wonderful and ravishing to behold to boot—I honestly would have been carried away by it, had it been written by an author I'd heretofore considered the most dismal purveyor of undiluted bilge upon the face of this planet. And wottinell did you mean, varlet, when you snidely remarked that the story "wasn't all you'd hoped for?" Sirrah—my second will meet your second in the*

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morning and battle unto death: thus is the fair lady's name avenged. As for you, sir: hence to the doghouse until thou publishest another wondrous tale from Miss Grey. Selah.

Item: **A Message for Jean.** *An excellent tale, but I want Morley's address just the same. I have a brand-new horsewhip. "Ronnie who," forsooth!*

Item: **The Real McCoy.** *Next to Miss Grey, Raymond is your finest writer. (Stop glowering, Morley! You're way up, but you may as well acknowledge your superior.) And this tale is no exception: the satire is a bit bald, but am I complaining? Hardly, editor, old duck.*

Item: **Galactic Gear.** *Had it not been for fair Carol, I'd have hailed the discovery of Conant as the high spot of this issue. Ah, my friend, don't you feel like a new Columbus sailing out onto the rim of the world, uncovering new worlds. And new writers, some of whom may well become great white stars in the velvet of night? Gee, getting poetic, ain't I now?*

Item: **The World in Balance.** *Utterly and completely hilarious. I hope you realized it was just pure hokum from start to finish. But this should make certain purveyors of "heavy" science feel quite disconcerted. And am I laughing! You should have run it under the name of Millard Sprague Campbell de Gordonsmith, though.*

Item (after all, even if you're not getting tired of this, I am): Ajax Calkins excellent; **Web of Moons** *likewise. Congrats to Bob Tucker, Basil Wells, and (amazingly enough) Fred Kummer for three dandy little tales, affording much enjoyment. And I mustn't forget A. A. Gilmour, whose* **Two Way Time** *was quite a fascinating piece. Though this is the tale about which you should have written: "It didn't come quite up to our expectations, but we found enough in it," etc.*

And now I bid thee farewell until next issue.

Brooklyn, N. Y.

This is going to hurt you more than it hurts us, Earl, my lad, but we're under strict orders not to reveal Miss Grey's address, or divulge any divers information about her. And we cannot see any reason for not adhering faithfully to those instructions. So, we'll close Station X with notes from

JOE GILBERT and HARRY JENKINS, JR.

Preliminary: (Jenkins) The April Future arrived two days ago, and now its finished. Well, this issue seems to strike a note of mediocrity and carries it throughout the issue. With no exceptions in the stories and but one exception in the art work.

The Cover. (Jenkins): God! To be perfectly, honestly frank, Doc, the cover stinks. Besides looking like an example of inferior high-school art work, the darn thing looks like it's getting ready to topple over and fall away, leaving nothing but a blank space on the cover. And one wishes that it would.

If I were a stickler for accuracy, I'd also ask you to show me that scene in the story. Perhaps Forte found it, I couldn't.

(Gilbert): The cover is pretty awful, Doc. Don't know much about art, but one thing that seems to be worng with it is the fact that there is no predominating center of interest. It's just a static, dead picture of a lot of things. And not very well drawn at that.

The artwork. (Jenkins): The Streeter illustration for **The Core** *bears a strong resemblance to Ye Olde "Flash Gordon" Raymond's style. Fair, but that's all. I would have liked to have seen Hannes tear into a couple of the "alien" scenes in that thing! . . . Bok for* **Mye Day** *is disappointing. Again, I would have liked to see his depiction of one of the*

Mye. I've got the original for the Calkins Coin by the by. . . . Streeter for **File 384** *is better than Forte on the cover. But that ain't sayin' much. Lin seems to use all pen and ink, no pencil at all. No like. . . . Yeah, Forte stinks. See* **Two Way Time.** *Difficult scene to illustrate, though. . . . Damon on* **Old Man Mars** *grabs second prize for the illustrations. Still don't like his females, though. Course I don't expect him to turn out Finlay Lamarrs —ahhhh!—but after all! . . . I keep forgetting what Johnny Michel called Kyle, but it was mighty good. Dave impresses me as a poor imitation of the old master, Paul. His humans certainly aren't any worse than Paul's, but—could they be? Again, I could argue about the accuracy of the illustration, but I won't. . . . Damon and Chet—Conanight—seem to be stealing a bit of Dolgov's thunder. The pic for* **Galactic Gear** *doesn't make me stand on my head, nor does it even make me feel good—in fact, it isn't so hot. But, it still leads me to believe that with the proper subject, Conanight could really do something. . . . Bok's boo'ful thing for* **Passage to Sharanee** *is the swellest of the swell. Just enough beauty to make it beautiful, and just enough repulsiveness to make one think of Strachey. Recalcitrant, yet beautiful—impossible? Hell, no!*

The Stories. (Gilbert): The stories inside aren't—well, what they should be, either. I'm afraid there wasn't anything really outstanding in the issue, and about the only really entertaining piece was Pearson's adventure tale about Ajax and his destiny, which, by the by, is first in the issue. . . . Gottesman is slipping. And badly. It's not that he isn't writing well anymore, because he's writing excellently. It 's just that his style is sparkling and very smooth—with nothing whatever behind it. You can almost hear his space bar click behind each sentence. There's no spirit in it, anymore, no attempt to do anything really effective; just a cold, calculated determination to knock out fiction that is crisp, highly acccptable, and about as human and appealing as a loan shark with the gout. His characters may talk and act like human beings, but his sympathy is never with them, and neither is the reader's. So they remain characters, and not people. . . . Too, his plots are horribly pointless and vague; he starts out from nowhere and returns to his starting point as emotionlessly and aimlessly as he began. In other words, he writes a neat, well told story that he doesn't believe or have any interest in outside of making it neat and well told. And that's not enough.

Two Way Time *had a cute little idea, poorly developed. . . .* **Four Star Planet** *was as insipid and hacked-up as something turned out by Kummer while suffering from dyspepsia. . . . No use going on. The rest of the stories hit one uniform level of mediocrity and stayed there unenthusiastically, with the possible exception of that unspeakable Winterbotham monstrosity, which was quite the worst thing I have tried to wallow through in some time.*

(Jenkins): Fiction? Oh yes, there were 10 stories in this issue, weren't there. First, methinks, I'll list them in order and then give indiivdual comments. Before I start, though, I'd like to mention the fact that not one of them stories was outstanding enuf to stand head and shoulders above the others. In fact, I could toss 7 of the stories around me, close me eyes, and choose No. 1 through No. 7. They're that close together. Not one of them was very good; not one of them was very bad. There was only one that I regretted spending my time on, and it wasn't too bad.

(Continued On Page 112)

Future Combined with Science Fiction

(Continued From Page 111)

OK, here they are: (1) **Mye Day,** *(2)* **The Core,** *(3)* **The Rebel Slug,** *(4)* **Flle 384,** *(5)* **Passage to Sharanee,** *(6)* **Four Star Planet,** *(7)* **Web of Moons,** *(8)* **Galactic Gear,** *(9)* **Old Man Mars,** *and (10)* **Two Way Time.** . . . *As for Ajax Calkins, the last line was the bestest line in the issue. I liked it. I laughed. Funny. Yeah. Aw hell. We want more Calkins. Yeah. He's funny. I laugh. Hah hah. Yeah. (Oh well, you can't out-Conway a Conway, so I'd better stop the "yeah" business.)*

The Core *was utterly confusing in spots, and in others it dragged so much that I had the temptation to toss the darn thing aside and read ((oh no you don't—you can't advertise — — in these columns! Ed.)) Yeah. However, in the end, the time spent on it was worth it. Don't know how Gottesman may impress others, but for some reason, my sympathy and feeling was extended to one character: Star MacDuff. And when he was very rudely killed by Gottesman, I was shocked. "What the hell," sez I, and am still saying it. Oh well. No wonder the Gentleman went nuts, though. Migawd, I had trouble just reading the darn problems.* . . .

As for **The Rebel Slug,** *it's the best Basil Wells that I've read to date. The ending wasn't shocking, it didn't strike me with the full force that it should have, but still—some of the punch was there.* . . . **Four Star Planet** *disappointing in that it wasn't extremely humorous. Don't know when I've ever laughed as much as I did when I read "Murder From Mars"; wish we could have another Wilson just as good. Don't like Conant's style of writing, but he had a nice ending to* **Galactic Gear.** *Quite a nice ending. As for* **Two-Way Time,** *I just didn't like the darn thing. Maybe my adversity to time-traveling tales had something to do with it. Maybe, and maybe not.*

Station X *remarkable this time for the comments, intelligent comments, on the art work.* **Futurian Times** *wasn't large enough, however. Enlarge it next time, if possible, please.*

The June issue looks as if it'll be a humdinger, what with Tucker and Hugh Raymond. Don't know how he does it, but almost all of the Raymond stories have been swell stuff.

Columbia Camp, 2409 Santee Avenue, Columbia, S. C.

Yeah, we get the idea. There are two writers whom you lads just don't like. Of course, no writer is good *all* the time, but even when Winterbotham and Kummer are excellent you still don't like them.

So we wind up another issue of *Station X.* Until we meet here again, here's to your health, to victory, and a brighter Future. Sincerely, Robert W. Lowndes, editor.

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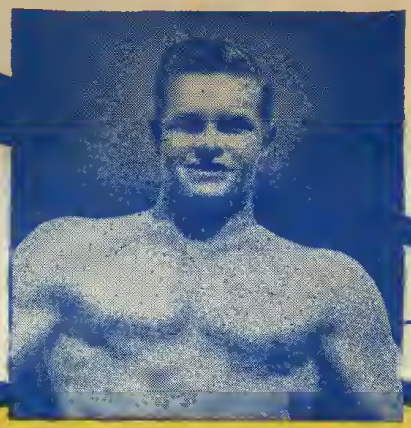

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